

Pyrrhic Victory

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Summary: Kakashi never wanted to be a teacher. Sarutobi insisted. And so, exploiting the very lax definitions of the Genin testing parameters, fought back in the most brutal way he could think of. And so, team Seven was born in blood, tears, and pain.

1. Prologue

****I use first person for the first bit of this story. If you don't like that, don't worry, it won't last long. For those of you who do, I'm sorry.****

****Prologue I****

Do you know what Pyrrhic means? Growing up I sure as hell didn't. It wasn't until I was much older that I learned what it meant. For those of you who are confused, pyrrhic means a victory won at too great a cost to have been worthwhile for the victor.

It's a funny word, pyrrhic. When you think of victory, you imagine a hero standing tall with his boot resting on the corpse (or corpses, I don't judge) of his defeated foe, flag held high, a grin of victory plastered over his (or her, once again I don't judge) perfectly chiseled face. If the hero is unlucky, there might be some blood on his pants leg, or if it's a really dramatic imagining the blood will be splattered across his or her jaw.

I wish things had turned out as neatly as that.

You see, in the beginning, I started a joke - which turned into a dream.

That dream started the whole world laughing.

I looked around me, at all the devastation I've seen, and I began to see.

That the joke was on me.

You'll understand later.

****Prologue II****

****Can't Pretend****

Count to four. Inhale.

Duty. It twisted up and gnawed at your insides. Duty ate at a soul as surely as acid would devour a body. It consumed you until there was nothing left.

The black mask sat on the table in front of him; face down, polished porcelain glinting in the light of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The concrete walls were suffocating; the only exit was a steel door directly across from him. He was alone.

Count to four. Exhale.

There was a knife beside the mask, cold, and the second option to leave the room. Though escape through that way was as permanent as any other.

His hands were still drenched in blood, though his black uniform didn't betray his murders - implacable, unstained, ever present, a testament to who he was to become.

Words.

They boomed in his head like a drum. Over and over.

"Once you don the mask, your old identity dies. You will be subsumed by your role as Ouroboros, Hand of Justice."

It was madness. But, he wasn't a stranger to madness anymore. Time seemed to distend, twisted back on itself and swallowed its own tail. How long had he been in here? A minute? A day? A week? Inside this shell of crafted stone there was nothing to mark time's passage.

The iron scent of blood was ever present. How he had he gotten so used to it? He taken and given in human lives like a dealer a hand of cards. The coppery taste sat on his lips like a viper. Perhaps his mind had broken and he was just putting himself back together again.

Count to four. Inhale.

Maybe it was love and loyalty that kept him going, a vestige sense of honor that had rusted with the rain. Honor went hand in hand with patriotism, didn't it? And he was a patriot. He'd sworn to live, bleed, and die for his country. He loved his home.

It didn't love him.

He was okay with that.

He reached out, red-stained hand hovering in-between the knife and

the mask " in-between life and death. He felt as though he could see himself, standing before the table, ramrod straight. He couldn't feel anything for himself, not even a vague sense of pity.

He almost felt sorrow for what he was about to do. He loved his country more than life itself. He couldn't measure them against each other. He was willing to commit the worst sin against his soul for the best reasons, and no one would ever know what he'd done.

He took the mask and placed it over his face, pushing long black hair away from his forehead to make room. Another deft movement and he pulled the hood to his black robes " and even the spiky, black mane of hair disappeared. The body armor beneath the robe didn't make a sound as he moved towards and opened the door.

Count to four. Exhale.

Itachi Uchiha died the moment his foot crossed the threshold. He was fourteen. He did his duty for Kage and country.

****Lee****

****Gods****

"Are you tired of living under shinobi oppression? Are your lives governed by people who live so far away, who don't know, and don't care about you? *Their wars have goose-stepped you into misery and bloodshed. They have developed speed, and shut themselves into their villages. I say unto you now, the bitterness you feel is only the passing of greed. Kiri, no" people! Don't give yourselves to brutes. Men who despise you, enslave you, tell you what to do, what to think, and what to feel! Treat you as fodder! Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men! Murderous men, with murderous hearts! You are not murderers. You are not cattle! You are people! By the promise of peace, brutes have risen to power. They do not fulfill that promise. They never will!"

Lee held his father's hand as he was pulled through the jostling crowd. As they went, he tried his best not trip over any of the cobblestones that jutted up from the uneven wagon way that served as the orator's platform. If he fell, his green tunic and pants, the robes of a merchant and his house, would be torn and his father would be disappointed.

"Come along, Lee. We need to hurry." Lee's father, Gamlin, said softly, giving Lee's hand a slight tug of encouragement. Gamlin was tall and well muscled for a merchant, a fact he often grumbled over when buying new cloths. Lee was tall for his age but had, unfortunately, inherited his mother's slender body.

Shouts and outraged calls were mixed with yells of encouragement as the crowd's agitation grew. Lee didn't understand what was going on. Why were the townsfolk yelling so much? He recognized Tilden the cobbler shouting with his wife in the crowd.

"What's going on, dad?" Lee asked once they were out of the crowd and he could be heard.

Gamlin slowed slightly, turning to look over his shoulder. Catching

sight of his son's worried face, he stopped and knelt down so that they were eye to eye. Lee had never seen such worry in his father's eyes, not even when they didn't have a nice home and ate scraps for food.

"Do you remember when we first moved here?" Gamlin asked, glancing over Lee's head towards where the man with slicked back white-haired dressed in black robes with red clouds continued to yell. "Do you remember how you were afraid?"

Lee nodded. He had been terrified of leaving his friends and the familiar trails he'd carved in the forests.

"Something similar is happening now and we need to move. This time we're going to Konoha itself." Gamlin smiled, though Lee could tell that it was forced. "You can become a ninja, like you always dreamed. You'll become one of the greatest ninja in the world."

Behind them, the white haired man continued to scream.

"Hokages free themselves, but enslave the people! Now let us fight to fulfill that promise! Let us fight to free the world, to do away with greed! The ninja think that they have all the power! But with the might of Jashin on your side, their magics and tricks can't harm you. Through god, you won't know pain. You won't know hunger! You won't know fear! In the name of Jashin! Let us all unite! And make even death turn even its head!*"

****Tobi****

****As Above, so Below****

"I know they're good people and mean well. The problem is that we just didn't have all the information at the time - we didn't think it through, you see?"

Tobi sat atop the tallest tower in Kiri, muttering to himself, contemplating the end of the all things.

The land hidden in mist, Tobi thought, was aptly named. Thick tendrils of mist wafted on a haze of fog, dancing to a rhythm dictated by a mad god. From where he sat, left foot dangling off the building, right leg tucked under the left's knee-joint, black-gloved hands resting on the ledge. A breeze tugged at the black robes as he stared down at where he could just barely make out the crowd gathering at the base of the building. From this height, picking out individual figures was impossible. He could barely make out what they were doing.

He ran a hand through his wild black hair, one of his fingers bumping the orange black-swirl mask covering his face. For several minutes, he watched the crowd continue to swell, even as a few figures detached themselves from the swarm and moved to the front.

"What a curious sight." Tobi remarked casually, turning his head to look at where a short man with hazel-gray hair sat reclined in a chair, pale pink eyes gazed absent-mindedly at the misty sky. His purple jacket and green pants were slightly damp from the wet air. "Your subjects are beginning to turn on you, Yagura. How do you feel about that? I hear you don't sleep well at night. I can help take

care of that for you."

Yagura didn't respond. He continued to stare up at the sky; the only indication that he heard was a twitch of the eye and right arm.

Tobi turned away from the Mizukage to focus back on where the ever-growing crowd was beginning to shout; their voices drifting up like the mournful wailings of a ghost. Three of the figures had pushed their charges to their knees.

"Care to place a bet on which way the heads will roll?"

No response, not that he truly expected one.

The crowd's voices turned into a roar as the three figures swung blades, cleanly severing the heads of their charges from their shoulders. The executions had begun.

Tobi rose from where he had been sitting and walked over to the Mizukage, his stride slow and meandering. "All my troubles, all my pains, stems from this thing you people call a brain," He said, lightly slapping Yagura over the top of the head. "So I've decided to relieve your people of this burden. Harsh, you call me? Possibly, but it is far kinder than what I've done to you, my friend. I could burrow into their minds, rip their consciousness from their bodies and turn them into puppets that only dance when I pull the strings."

Tobi flipped around and clasped his hands behind his head. "But who has the time? To go through and rend each ant's mind individually would be a terrible waste of my efforts, don't you think?"

There was no answer. The dead eyes of the Mizukage continued to stare blankly into the sky.

Tobi stepped back over to the building's edge, and stared down at where the crowd was now having to be restrained by a row of shinobi. Occasionally, he could see a flash of fire or a burst of lightning. "You can come out, Itachi."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a figure detached itself from the shadows cast by the stair's covering and stepped into the lethargic light that managed to pierce through Kiri's smothering mists.

Itachi was an unassuming sight. Average height and build, black hair swept back into a small ponytail, he stood dressed in the black and red Akatsuki cloak with a casual air, as though he'd wandered onto the roof quite by accident. Pronounced lines framed his nose. "You summoned me." He said in a flat tone.

"Yes, I did. Come here." Tobi ordered with a small wave. "I will show you how to destroy a nation."

Itachi walked over to stand beside Tobi and glanced down at where the executions were being interrupted by people jumping up onto the stage before returning his gaze to his leader.

"The first step in taking control of a nation is the simplest: You find someone to hate."

"Rebels, I assume." Itachi said, his voice ever the flat, dead bass that never wavered, never trembled, and only ever truly questioned once.

Tobi chuckled dryly. "Hardly. They are the family of rebels, and a few dozen random people taken from their homes last night - women and children mostly.

Itachi's expression remained perfectly neutral, not even a flicker of passion or anger in his dark eyes. They were almost as dead as the Mizukage's lying on the chair. Tobi had to marvel at Itachi's apathy for everything beyond his sense of duty. It was truly a marvelous tool to wield.

The screams picked up intensity in the background followed by the deep bass of a small detonation.

"The people here will join the rebellion, and others will hear of what happened and will shy away from government control." Itachi said. "It will hasten the rebel's inevitable victory."

"The rebel's time on stage has come. Their role in this production's lines were always uncertain until recently. How did things go for you? Kisame wasn't too much of a pain, was he?"

"The mission was a success." Itachi said. "Half of Kiri's lower court has been eliminated and the evidence that it was Iwa behind the killings has been placed. They'll see through the lie, Kumo will be blamed. They are closest and stand the most to gain from the instability."

"Excellent." Tobi breathed.

Itachi hesitated momentarily, before speaking in a slow voice, as though working through a problem in his head. "The Daimyo will order a proportional response, but the nation will be in no shape to carry out those orders. Tariffs will be raised and the economy will sink even further, which will spur the rebels into an even greater frenzy. With more and more people flocking to join their banner."

Tobi snorted. "Kiri has been destabilized for long enough. Yagura has served his purposes and I need a new board set up, free of my control for now. Their stamping feet will obliterate any signs of my interference under the weight of their own anger."

"That's where Kisame, Kakazu, and I will come into play. Kisame and I will aid the rebel's from the shadows," Itachi continued. "You won't have us do anything major at first, just a push here or there, an outpost inconspicuously empty, a field general with a mysterious sickness. The rebel's will be lucky, even as you meet with Mei's generals and offer them Kakazu's medical talent. They will accept with few questions, happy to finally be receiving aid, regardless of the source."

"I see you've read a few pages of the script already." Tobi said, turning away from the destruction below to meet Itachi's blank eyes.

After several seconds, Itachi turned away and looked down at where a

small battle had broken out. It was one-sided, the tower's guard rebuffing the angry crowd and pushing them back. Every few flashes, a guard would dart in and pluck a member from the crowd. He would then force his hostage to the ground and perform his execution, tossing the severed head back into the crowd.

"You are dismissed." Tobi said, "Set about spreading what's happening here, and see that the story gets to the right ears." He turned slightly and smiled from behind the mask. "Unless you want to jump down there and get yourself a head of the competition." He chuckled at his own joke.

Itachi vanished, dissipating the mist for a brief few seconds before the errant strands of vapor rushed in to fill in where the Uchiha had once been.

An air of mischief settled over Tobi's shoulders like a well-worn cloak. Slowly, deliberately slowly, Tobi turned to where Yagura still reclined. With measured strides, he moved over to the defunct Mizukage. With one hand, he reached out and grasped the Kage by his jacket and lifted him from the chair; the other moving to his mask.

"Now, we have to prepare you for your performance with the rebels in a few months. It wouldn't due for that lump of chakra in you to interfere and ruin my plans.

There must have been a little of Yagura left, as the pink eyes shifted away to look at the floor. Tobi shook him, "Look at me." No response. Tobi whipped the Kage around and slammed him into the floor, cracking the tiles and rupturing one of the water pipes. "Look at me!" Tobi roared.

What little control Yagura had scrapped together cracked and his eyes fixed once more on Tobi's face.

"You need to focus. This is important." Tobi's voice was mocking parody of being serious. "Your little show of resistance tells me that you need to be reeducated. Its fine, don't worry. I'mâ€|happy, to oblige."

Tobi gripped the edge of his mask, "try not to move." With a deft movement, he whipped the orange mask from his face and tossed it clattering to the ground.

In that moment, if the rebels could have heard, they would have known that puppets could feel pain and even Kages scream.

****End of Prologue****

****The astrics at the start of the chapter denote phrases I've changed from Chaplin's speech on war. I couldn't help but to twist it.****

2. Chapter One

****A/N:WOOO! ****

****Chapter One****

****As Happy as You Please****

___If my friends read these words, please know that power is a heavy burden. The toad prophecies say that I will have the power to save the world. Me? Can you imagine it? What they don't say is that I will have the power to destroy it.___

Line Break****

The Hokage's office was meant to be warm " welcoming - a quiet haven to returning ninja. The soft, cream-colored walls and large windows that let in a moderate amount of sunlight were broken only by the occasional bookshelf stacked with both crinkled scrolls and leather-bound books alike, each giving the air a comfortable, musty atmosphere that encouraged muscles to relax in the plush chairs that were scattered through the room. That was the intent, at any rate.

The intent, as ever, was lost on Kakashi, who sat stiff-backed in his chair; his singular visible eye that wasn't hidden by a Konoha headband was locked with the Hokage. He had never been one for informality when in the presence of his superior, aside from the one indiscretion he allowed himself in the form of an orange book tucked into his vest's pocket. His black, militant attire, reminiscent of his days in ANBU, was augmented with a green flak jacket and slightly looser pants. White linen bandages were wrapped around his ankles and thighs to stifle the sound of movement and provide first aid in the event of an emergency. Konoha's headband and symbol of his allegiance was wrapped around diagonally across his head, covering one of his eyes. His prematurely gray hair swept back and sticking up at odd angles. He had often been compared to a scarecrow, gangly, narrow, and most importantly, terrifying to the targeted audience.

The silent battle of wills between him and his leader had been going on for the better part of an hour. Sarutobi Hiruzen was puffing pleasantly on his pipe, white robes of office nearly glowing in the orange light filtering in through the windows behind him. His aged face that was almost as wrinkled as the tomes he kept. A slight smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he held Kakashi's gaze with an even one of his own.

"I refuse." Kakashi said sharply, breaking the silence, his lips thinning as he tapped the outline of one of his knives poking through his weapon's pouch, the only outward expression of his annoyance.

His refusal was technically treason, and Kakashi could practically feel the ANBU hiding in the shadows grip their weapon's hilts. The Hokage raised a hand; forestalling their movement, his smile never faltering.

"I haven't even said a word." The Hokage pointed out.

"You don't have to." Kakashi allowed himself a soft smile. He could hear the ANBU's tendons creak as they gripped their swords tighter.

"As childish as ever." Sarutobi sighed and leaned back slightly in his chair; his gray eyes were like chips of obsidian boring into

Kakashi's own. Then, with another wave of his hand, the ANBU's presence vanished.

"ANBU have grown tense since I left." Kakashi pointed out idly.

The Hokage chuckled and said, "They're no longer accustomed to your little games."

"How very irresponsible of me." Kakashi said dryly. "A trait quite unbecoming of a ANBU captain or any kind of authority figure. Perhaps that's why I left."

The Hokage's smile broadened. "To the point, and so soon? Aren't we impatient today?"

"Old age must be settling on me already, another reason I'm unfit to lead. Either way, I know why I'm here. It is for the same reason I'm here every year. You want me to fail another team."

The Hokage didn't respond immediately. Instead, he reached down and opened one of the drawers on his desk, withdrawing a pipe - who's finely polished wood appeared almost as old as the Hokage himself. Taking his time, he stuffed his pipe and lit it with a small flame from the tip of his thumb. After a few puffs, Sarutobi blew a long stream of smoke out from his nostrils, which curled and twisted on the invisible eddies of wind floating around in the office.

They remained like that, the Hokage smoking quietly and Kakashi sitting straight backed in his chair, for ten minutes.

Kakashi was a good shinobi. He was a very good shinobi. He was, in fact, a so wholly accomplished shinobi that very few could say they dreamed of being his equal. However, the old and withered man who sat before him was not only stronger than he was, but was so old that he'd forgotten powers and stratagems Kakashi was only just discovering existed.

"I'm afraid declining isn't an option this time, nor is failing them." Sarutobi said in what Kakashi could tell was a carefully fabricated voice meant to convey some sense of sympathy.

"What do you mean? The testing jounin retains the right to fail any group he deems unworthy of becoming genin."

Sarutobi nodded, "True, true." He said indulgently, "Ordinarily you would be quite correct. However, circumstances are a bit different for this team."

Kakashi's eye narrowed in thought. "Naruto graduated and you want me to train him because of his father."

Sarutobi shrugged, releasing another puff on his tobacco. "Along with Naruto, Sasuke Uchiha and a promising civilian girl, one Sakura Haruno, also graduated. My advising body and I believe that you are the teacher best suited for training them. Your asset would be invaluable in training the Uchiha. This is not to mention that you could mold Naruto, as your mentor would have wanted. In addition your diverse skill sets ensure that whatever direction Sakura chooses, you could guide her."

Kakashi hesitated for a moment, actually seeming to consider the offer, before shaking his head. "My answer is still no. I am not used to baby-sitting children. I train soldiers, ANBU who are already competent in what they do."

Sarutobi sighed, placed his pipe on his table, and opened one of the drawers in his desk. He withdrew a form and set it on his desk. "Kakashi, as I'm sure you are aware, Konoha has always offered their ninja greater autonomy than any other nation. We allow Jounin and Chuunin to select teams, choose to decline missions if they feel they are not suited for the post, and even request funds in emergencies. These freedoms are what we pride ourselves on and what you're choosing to exercise. I believe in freedom, Kakashi."

Kakashi suddenly had the feeling that he was 'on the ropes' as the saying went. This was never a position professional shinobi enjoyed being in. It made them violent. Looking down, he read the top paragraph of the form, 'posting reassignment: Suna outpost "Ventari Desert. Temperature: 137 degrees; average. Danger of sandstorms: high. Warning: Jounin assigned to the post must be experienced with water-based techniques and not unfamiliar with cramped living space, low food and water supply.'

"Not many believe in freedom these days, though of course they will protest otherwise. There is always a choice," Sarutobi continued as he pulled out a pen from another drawer and set it to rest beside the forms. "And within the definition of freedom comes the implication of the consequences for those choices. I would argue that this is the freedom in which all the others sit upon. Now, I will ask you again. Will you take the job?"

Kakashi sighed, leaning back in his chair, finger tapping a new, agitated rhythm on his kunai holster. Suna was a choice, a miserable one, but he'd endured worse. The trick to swallowing a bitter pill was to make someone else do the same, because misery loves company.

"I train them my way, no questions. Any tests I give them are beyond reproach."

Sarutobi leaned forward, steepling his fingers before him on the table. "So let me get this straight. You are, in essence, asking for complete carte blanche? Is that correct?"
>Kakashi nodded.<p>

"Absolutely not." The Third Hokage said sharply. "Kakashi, this is a negotiation in so far as you have two choices available. Either you take and train the team, or you spend the rest of your career in virtual purgatory."

Kakashi had learned from years of dealing with insubordinate underlings one precious skill: how to negotiate. You always aim high. He had little doubt that the Lord Third was perfectly aware of what he was doing. But that was the thing about haggling: it paid to be persistent. Some just took more cajoling than others. There was always another way "something underneath the underneath, if you will."

"I suppose I have no choice. I'll train them so long as they are able."

This time it was Sarutobi's turn to narrow his eyes. "You will not allow any of them to come to permanent harm, by your hand or any other. You will act in their best interests at all times, as any reasonable instructor should."

Kakashi had to repress a smile. There it was, the silver lining in a cloud filled with refuse. A reasonable instructor would ensure that his students had the proper freedoms, support them from afar and answer their questions when they needed it. He could message this mission in until they passed their chunnin exams or left. Paid vacation, sort of speak. He could even pick up a few A rank missions on the side.

"It appears that I have no choice." Kakashi said, putting the proper amount of grudging none-compliance his Hokage would expect.

Sarutobi replaced the forms in his desk, saying, "I'm glad we could come to understand each other."

Kakashi took this as the dismissal it was. Standing, he had just made it to the door, his hand around the knob, when Sarutobi spoke again. "Kakashi, I do expect weekly reports on their progress. And if I feel that your team isn't progressing in the expected manner, Suna would be preferable."

****Line Break****

Two hours later saw Kakashi downing his eighth jiu shot, and still going strong. Without so much of a quaver of his hand, he set the shot glass upside down beside its seven other fallen brethren and signaled the bartender, a short man with a full beard and a shaven head, for another.

Gamlin eyed Kakashi, and then eyed Kakashi's stash of slain drinks, before shaking his head and reaching below his bar to pull out the bottle. He set it beside Kakashi without a word and returned to where he'd been rinsing glasses.

'_Good man_' thought Kakashi, taking a pull straight from the bottle.

"It is most unyouthful to be drinking this early in the morning." Said a voice that, in reflection of Kakashi's current mood, held way too much enthusiasm for it to be healthy.

Might Gai slid onto the stool beside Kakashi's, his garishly green spandex suit that left way too little to the imagination seemed to glow in the dim atmosphere of the bar. He flashed a smile that displayed a full set of very white teeth, a rare possession in their line of work, especially for a Taijutsu master. "Should you not be testing your students?"

Kakashi shrugged and took another swig from the bottle. "I suppose they're still waiting for me in the classroom. I haven't gone to introduce myself."

Gai's immense eyebrows met in a plutonic clash above his wide eyes. "This is most unyouthful!" he exclaimed, drawing irritated glances from the other patrons. They weren't jounin and therefor were quite

unaccustomed to Gai's exuberant nature. "My rival, I cannot express how my flames of youth soared when I heard that you were finally taking on a team. But here I find you, neglecting your undoubtedly radiantly youthful team. I cannot help but feel as though this is your all-time most unyouthful act."

Kakashi made a face under his mask as though he'd swallowed something exceptionally bitter. "I don't want to train children, Gai. I'm an assassin, not a baby-sitter."

Gai studied him for a moment, massive eyebrows shifting like tectonic plates. Eventually, he reached down and withdrew a single ryo coin and set it on the table. It was old; the metal edges and face worn and beveled from so many hands rubbing it so as to be barely recognizable as currency. Kakashi raised an eyebrow, having recognized and understood the significance immediately.

Gai pushed the coin off the table with a disdainful flick of his finger. Kakashi caught it in an open palm before it hit the ground. Straightening up, he leveled a questioning look at his self-proclaimed 'eternal rival.'

"My rival," Gai said, in a surprisingly serious tone, "I will not take that coin back until you prove that you are willing to fan your youthful flames once more." And with that enigmatic parting repost, Gai stood and left.

Kakashi continued to sit on his barstool, slowly rotating the coin in his hand, feeling the smooth contours as he mulled over what Gai had said. In the end, it all boiled down to one thing. He didn't have a choice. He was backed into a wall.

And no shinobi liked being cornered.

He grimaced, a thought occurring to him. There was always something under the underneath, as distasteful as it was at times. There were two ways to skin a cat. And there was always another option.

As he left the bar, he felt his stomach turn a bit at what he was planning to do. They were children after all, fresh out of the academy, and it was only a teaching job. The problem was that if he was going to do this, he was going to do it his way, be damned the consequences. If they survived, they'd be stronger for it. And still, he was perfectly intentioned to keep them in one piece and physically able. What he had planned wouldn't maim them.

It was their will he was going to strike at. He was going to do it through their bodies, and by the gods if they still wanted anything to do with the shinobi program after what he was going to do to them, they deserved far better than any training he could give them.

****Line Break****

The last twenty-four hours had been a very disillusioning time period for Naruto. He sat at the back of the classroom, seated at one of the many desks " fingers fumbling distractedly with a knot of cloth in his orange jumpsuit. The headband tied around his forehead keeping his blond hair from falling into his downcast eyes felt heavy, far heavier than the thin strip of aluminum should have been.

The price for the scrap of metal still agitated him. Last night, he had learned that he was the warden for one of the greatest living natural disasters that walked the planet. He swore that he heard it chuckling in the dark recesses of his mind, but that was probably just his imagination playing tricks on him. He hadn't ever heard it before he knew of its existence inside of him. There was no reason to assume knowledge of it granted power over him. No, it was much simpler to believe that it was his imagination running wild. For once, he wished that his imagination wasn't so creative, now that it was pointed at him.

Even so, that wasn't what was bothering him, his troubles were much more agrarian. Iruka-sensei had been hurt. Sure, the dark-skinned professor stood before him at the head of the classroom, talking about how they were ninja of the hidden-leaf now, and that such responsibility carried with it certain expectations and codes. But his current well-being wasn't the point. The point was that he had been hurt because Naruto hadn't been strong enough. His sensei, the one who Naruto respected more than any other man, had been wounded because he hadn't been fast enough, hadn't been smart enough to see through Mizuki's lies. Hindsight was 20/20, and now it was painfully obvious that Mizuki's smile and kind words were lip service.

"Naruto."

Naruto's head jerked up, blinking distractedly as he focused on his teacher, who had a look of weary resignation on his face as he scratched at the scar that across both cheekbones and the ridge of his nose.

"Yes? Sensei?" Naruto asked, hesitantly, becoming aware for the first time that aside from him and Iruka, there were only two other people in the room.

Iruka sighed, wincing as the exhalation strained the wound that wasn't even a week old on his back. "Not paying attention again?"

Naruto blushed at the question and mumbled an apology along with a smile and a, "got a lot on my mind."

"It's to be expected, all things considered." Iruka allowed, moving from his desk to the door. He had another class to be to soon. "You're on team seven with Sasuke and Sakura under your jounin sensei who should be around to pick you up fairly soon." Iruka let out another sigh, though this one wasn't directed at Naruto. "You three will probably be waiting here for a while if the rumors of that particular Jounin are true. Anything that isn't a mission doesn't really concern him, as memory serves." Iruka trailed off, seeming to speak to himself. "He'll probably give you some silly test."

With that, Iruka pushed the door open and closed, his footsteps receding down the hall until they vanished all together.

Naruto glanced at where his teammates sat near the front of the class. Sasuke, the undisputed best of his class sat slouched in his chair, black, unkempt. The color of his dark-blue shirt was popped, as if hoping that the thin bit of cloth would be enough to deter the

only female on the team who, for her part, was seated so close to him that the outside observer might have assumed that they were joined at the hip.

Naruto huffed, blowing a spike of his own blond hair away from his face. Sakura's affection for Sasuke was reciprocated by the Uchiha in so as much as Naruto's own devotion to Sakura was returned in turn. That is to say, not at all. Sasuke ignored the pink-haired girl who sat beside him chattering away cheerfully, as though he were auditioning for the part of a statue. He barely moved, hardly appearing to even breathe. Coal black eyes were fixed on the chalk-smudged blackboard resolutely, as though the answer to the universe was contained in the half erased ether.

It was discouraging, in a way. Had he been told a few days ago that he was going to be put on a team with Sakura, he would have jumped into the sky, hooting in triumph. Today though, it worried him. Iruka had been hurt so easily. What was to say that the same couldn't happen with his team? Best not to think about it.

Forgetting things, thankfully, was something Naruto excelled at.

****Line Break****

Kakashi sat perched on the railings at the edges of the academy's roof cordoning off the rest of the world from a terminal drop and a sudden stop. He had changed into his old black ANBU robes. They were a bit musty and loose around the shoulders, but it fit well all the same. Behind him and on the ground rested a black bag full of assorted items plied commonly in his trade.

He was having second thoughts about his little plan. The risks were immense, but the rewards could be nearly incalculable if he succeeded. He had spent weeks combing over each of his future student's psych profiles. He tried to consult with a few of the Yamanaka Clan, but they'd taken one look at his proposed idea and shouted at him. It had been an educational experience for him, increasing his vocabulary of expletives by at least a fourth. Who knew a bunch of shrinks were so violent?

The Hokage hadn't been impressed, either. He had received a letter stating in no uncertain terms that if his plan didn't work, hell would make a wonderful vacation home compared to what would await him. The letter also made it clear, through the liberal use of subtext, that no expense would be spared to find him if he decided to run.

It was times like this that Kakashi hated certain aspects of his personality. He could be an apathetic bastard about just about everything most of the time. It was just on the rare occasions, that when he bothered to actually to put his mind to something, he tended to hold nothing back. It had cost him in his past; the eye that wasn't his, resting behind his headband attested to that.

He felt one of the three chakra signatures in the classroom he was monitoring down below begin to move. Hopping down from the railing, he hoisted the black bag over his shoulder with ease, the metal inside jangling noisily. He made a single handsign and vanished in a worried gust of leaves.

****Line Break****

Sakura wondered exactly what she was doing wrong. She had flipped through every magazine, read a whole library full of romance novels, and plumbed the very depths of the fashion stores in an effort to impress the raven-haired boy sitting across from her.

Her efforts thus far seemed to have the opposite effect than she intended. Indeed, unless she was very much mistaken, Sasuke's efforts to not even have her in his periphery had doubled over this past year. Was it her hair? It couldn't be the literature. The writers wouldn't have spent the time penning the material if they hadn't thoroughly researched the subject. No, the tried and true works of Persons couldn't be wrong. It had to be her. She just wasn't trying hard enough.

Sasuke stood, his sudden movement almost knocking her to the ground.

"I'm tired of waiting. I'm leaving." He said, moving towards the door.

Sakura blinked from where she sat awkwardly on the edge of her seat. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to train." He said again over his shoulder as he passed through the door.

Of course. What else had she expected?

Scrambling hastily to her feet, she shot off after him. Catapulting into the hall with surprising speed, she was flabbergasted to discover that she couldn't see hide nor hair of Sasuke's slouching and handsomely curved shoulders. She also didn't see the rest of him, as it happened.

"Wha-?" She said.

That was as far as she got. A part of her mind, the part that wasn't swimming as her vision blurred, realized that she hasn't been standing on a beach a moment ago. This was almost exactly like what Iruka had been explaining what an illusionary genjutsu would be like the other week. She swayed on the spot, suddenly finding it very difficult to stand properly.

"Everyone reacts differently to that one," a male voice noted casually behind her. "It would make things so much easier if it was uniform, most just see feathers. Though, legends say that someone once saw unicorns. Anyway, using the Shunshin before you're out completely might disrupt your pathways and-"

Sakura squinted, as she turned, trying to make out what the man was saying over the sound of ocean waves. Why was she on the beach? Hadn't she been? Well hadn't she been not here? She couldn't remember where she had been, she was just certain it wasn't where she was now.

She stumbled and felt someone catch her. A rushing sensation was the last thing she registered before the sun set, leaving her with the

taste of sand on her tongue.

****Line Break****

A dim sound and the splash of freezing water jolted Naruto from a dream of single handedly stopping a bank robbery lead by an entire platoon of clowns armed to the teeth with smoke bombs and rubber chickens.

Spluttering wildly, his eyes spun in his head like a particularly violent game of marbles. He was in a small, square gray-stone room occupied only by himself, a small wooden desk, and a bare bulb. Seated behind the desk a thin man with grayish silver hair sat. A black mask was pulled up over his nose and one of his eyes was covered by a shinobi's headband. The black robes he wore seemed to be straight off the shoulders of the grim reaper.

Naruto tried to stand up, but was jolted when he realized he was tied to the chair by cords of wire around his neck, waist, and ankles. His hands were tied together and resting in his lap.

"Water?" The man asked, his deep brown eye never wavering from Naruto's own.

"Why am I here?" Naruto asked in a raspy voice, wincing as his throat submitted protest.

"A surprisingly lucid question under the circumstances," the man said. "But we'll come to that later. I am Hatake Kakashi, however you may call me 'you fuck' - it'll save time. In the meantime, drink." Kakashi pushed a glass of liquid towards Naruto across the table.

Naruto took the cup, clasping the cool glass in both hands before giving the man, who had an uncanny resemblance to a scarecrow, a wary glance. An often-ignored voice in the back of his head cautioned that the water could be drugged.

He drank. The blessedly cool liquid slid down his throat like ambrosia gifted directly from the gods. After draining the cup, Naruto gave the glass one last mournful expression before he set it back down on the table, wishing there was more.

"Excellent." Kakashi, if that really was his name, said. He leaned back, and looped his hands behind his head.

Realization dawned on Naruto. This was obviously some kind of test. Iruka had mentioned something along those lines. He obviously wasn't meant to hear that, but he'd always had rather keen hearing. His grin spanned from ear to ear. This was going to be easy. Confidence and determination was something he had in spades.

Kakashi, or the man who called himself Kakashi, raised his eyebrows at Naruto's grin. "You had best enjoy that feeling. It won't last long."

"What?" Naruto asked, then blinked. The lights were slowly dimming. That wouldn't have been overly unexpected if the associated feeling of drowsiness accompanied it. If anything, Naruto felt even more alert, adrenaline was coursing through his veins in full force. He

tried raising his arms but found that he couldn't. They wouldn't respond to his commands. They just sat on his lap like dead fish.

He strained to see Kakashi stand through the darkening room. "What's going on?"

"What's going on?" Kakashi asked, repeating Naruto's question back at him. "Why, we've come full circle to question you posed when you first woke up. It's always the vision that goes first, followed by impaired motor functions."

"What do you want?" Naruto asked, feeling " for the first time " fear. It was churning in his gut; mixing with whatever was in the water and making him want to vomit.

"Freedom and a vague sense of curiosity."

His vision was completely gone now. He could hear the sound of metal clanging off wood.

"The truly marvelous aspect of this concoction is that it leaves your sense of touch completely intact. The upchuck all of this is that you-" blinding pain erupted just above Naruto's left knee, "feel everything, perfectly."

Naruto tried to thrash, but his rebellious body wouldn't move. He could barely scream, the paralytic potion having taken the strength from his lungs. A second pain exploded into being in the same spot on his right knee. It felt like someone had shoved hot knives into his legs.

"The needles coated in a nerve toxin that I've inserted into your knees just above your kneecaps are currently nestled directly in the middle of a nerve cluster. I know from first-hand experience that, although the needles are small and barely penetrate the skin, the pain is quite exquisite. But let's not get ahead of ourselves." A clank. "How about the cheese grater next? Taken to the shins and shoulder blades, it could be quite some time before I get through the bone." Another clang as Kakashi dropped what he was holding back to the table and picked up something else. "No, that won't work. But how about this little beauty?"

"Why are you doing this?" Naruto begged, his voice thick with roiling terror. He couldn't see what Kakashi was holding, but imagination supplied more than enough vivid pictures. It was, if anything, worse. In his imagination there wasn't just one device, but thousands, each with its own inventive use on how it could be employed to inflict pain.

"A good question. Why do you think I'm doing this?"

"This is some kind of test." Naruto bit out between clenched teeth. The academy had done something similar a year ago. They were divided into two groups and each took turns tying one to a chair and attempting to beat the information out of each other, watched over carefully from a distance by their instructors. This was simply one step up from that, nothing more

Kakashi chuckled pityingly. "No," he crooned, ruffling Naruto's hair with a hand. "Your assumption is flawed in presuming I'm from

Konoha."

"You have a Konoha headband, I saw it." He roared.

Another chuckle.

"And how difficult do you think it was for me to get one, hmm? A lump of metal bound to a strip of cloth with a simple engraving? They're sold at practically every civilian shop with a sign that reads, 'feel like a ninja today!' Now, let me pose a question to you. Do you think Mizuki was foolish enough to have worked alone?"

The frozen tundra of Naruto's confidence shattered into tiny glacier-like pieces; each piece of which settled somewhere around Naruto's navel, freezing his insides in something akin to toughened concrete.

He caught a whiff of smoke and something metallic, cold, and round was set on his knees. It didn't hurt, and for that he was grateful.

"I'm going to leave you here for a bit. I've got somewhere else to be and I can see you need some time to come to terms with your situation. While you do that, I want you to think about something for me? Would you do that?"

Naruto nodded as best he could, anything to get rid of the terrible man.

"What are you?"

There was a gust of wind, and some primal part of Naruto's brain told him he was now alone in the room. The scent of smoke was becoming more pungent and the dull pain left in his legs from where Kakashi had pricked him was beginning to grow again.

The pieces to the puzzle clicked metaphorically in the place. The icy chill in his stomach extended to his spine as he realized that the metal disk on his lap was in fact a candleholder. There was little doubt that the flame was currently heating up the metal pins shoved into his nerve clusters.

He screamed in horror, desperately trying to move muscles that were as good as dead.

****Line Break****

Sakura hadn't known fear, not really. Up until this point in time, she had thought that she understood what it meant to be afraid. The fear of rejection, the sneaking suspicion of something lurking under her bed, that she wasn't good enough for her parents. It was as if those fears had gotten together, formed one greater terror, and crawled out from her head to leaning against the wall, silver hair gleaming in the harsh light cast by a single bulb hanging from the stone ceiling above.

Her eyes kept flickering between him and the bloody and beaten body hanging hogtied upside down, suspended with his nose just above the ground. Sasuke hadn't so much as twitched in over an hour. His pants were torn, and gouge lines extended down his exposed torso like

flashes of red lightning, a memory of the knife.

So far the one-eyed masked man had yet to say a word. He had entered the room, and without so much as a word of acknowledgement or a glance in her direction, he had injected Sasuke with something in a needle, crammed something in his mouth and forced him to swallow. The man had then proceeded to use Sasuke like a particularly revolting punching bag.

Sasuke had tried to fight back at first. Her beautiful Uchiha had thrashed about like a hooked fish, had cried out hoarsely before being silenced by boot to the throat. The beating seemed to last for an eternity, it was only once Sasuke had stopped struggling and a bloody pool the size of a small carpet had welled up around him, fed by the small stream of blood that dripped from the tip of the Uchiha's nose, did the beating stop. The small 'tflip' noises made by Sasuke's blood and her hitching, panic breathing were the only sounds the broke the violent silence.

She didn't dare move from where sat on the small wooden barstool for fear that she might evoke the nameless man's sudden wrath. Her lungs felt like they were filled with fire, each breath seemed to enter, rattle around, and then wheeze from her make-up stained, trembling lips.

The man moved and suddenly there was no sound to hide behind. Her breath stilled, becoming as tacit as the inaudible steps the man took, as he seemed to glide along the space between them. Bending down and resting his hands on his knees to look into her eyes with his single one, he gave her a smile so radiant through his thin mask that for an instant Sakura could almost believe the brown orb he had fixed her with belayed kindness; that everything up until now had been one terrible misunderstanding and he had come to help.

"I have an admonition to make." The man said in a voice like quicksilver. His words seem to drift through his mask with an easy unconcern, as though the boy's body hanging behind him was as unobtrusive as furniture. "I dislike hitting children."

A hope blossomed in her chest, even as her eyes flickered to Sasuke's hanging body. Maybe she would be spared his fate. Together, once the man left, she could free him and they could escape together. Their kidnapper hadn't tied her hands yet.

"So I'll tell you what," the man continued, lifting one hand from his knee and reaching into a pocket of his robes. "I'm going to give you instructions and you're going to hurt your friend over there. If you don't, I'm going to do what you were supposed to do, only longer and make it all the more painful."

He pulled out a small blade, no larger than a dinner knife, but far sharper than any kitchen appliance. The man lifted his other hand from his knee and took her by the hand, pressing the blade hilt first into it.

"I want you to go over there, cut your boyfriend down and tie him to the stool you're using now. After that, you're going to carve the word 'happy' into his left pectoral. They taught you some anatomy at the academy, yes?"

Sakura felt her eyes widen in abject terror mixed with revulsion. She stammered, trying to put words to her feelings, but diction simply wasn't sufficient enough to express her repugnance.

With slow, backwards steps, her torturer backed up to lean against the wall once more, folding his arms over his chest even as he toyed with a blade identical to the one she had in her hand.

>Sakura stared unmoving at the weapon in her hand. The blade was half the size of the hilt and, as weapons went, this one would be fairly useless in combat. Hell, a dull kunai would probably serve more use in terms of practicality.<p>

"The brat hasn't got all day. There is undoubtedly a lot of blood in his head by now, and the supplement pill I gave him will only do so much."

Sakura's gaze drifted from her 'weapon' to the object of her affections. The fine lines of his cheekbones were not so fine anymore. Bruises were starting to blot his face, and swelling had sealed on his eyes shut.

She stood, barely. Her entire body felt numb, as if it belonged to someone else. Her traitorous legs could barely support her. Adrenalin, fear, and confusion had striped her of what little strength she had possessed. She had heard tales that those chemicals were supposed to strengthen her, enabling her to preform heroic acts. The storybooks were a far cry away from her current reality.

She stepped up to Sasuke's body and swung at the ropes holding up him with an unsteady hand. Sasuke's body hit the ground like a sack of tomato sauce, all loose limbs and swollen edges.

She stared at his prone form. He was so pale he could have passed for dead.

"Move along, time is ticking and I've got places to be."

Sasuke's body was heavy and her fingers fumbled with the knots for what felt like ages. It was only the occasional signs of life, the spasmodic twitch of a muscle, and his pulse that kept her moving. Eventually she managed to get him up so that the center of his back was on the stool, leaving his head, arms, and legs to dangle limply.

The man grunted, moving forward causing Sakura to shy away in fear. She watched, hating her own helplessness, as she watched him withdraw four iron rods with a circular hoop at one end from his pouch. He drove each of these into the concrete with ridiculous ease, using only his bare hands. When he was finished, the rods formed a square around where she'd positioned Sasuke's unconscious body, each loop at the end of a rod near a hand or foot.

"Use those to secure him down. If he gets free at any point, I'll finish what I've assigned you to do to him, and then move on to you, tripling the pain."

"I can't," she pleaded, tears dropping from her eyes. "I can't do it. Please, don't make me do it."

If the man was moved by her words, he didn't show it. He continued to

lean against the wall, arms folded, his black robes making him appear like a splotch against the gray wall in the harsh light. With a grunt, he pushed off from the wall with one foot and advanced forward. Unfolding his arms, ropes seemed to appear in his hands as if by magic. With utilitarian movements, he soon had Sasuke splayed wide over the chair, his back arching with the strain the robes were exerting on his limbs. He was bound far tighter and more painfully than she would ever have achieved.

Sakura jumped in surprise as the man spun away from his work towards her. She yelped and tried to strike out at him with the weapon he gave her. He knocked it aside with a disdainful backhand, reaching out and grabbing her by her pink tresses.

She cried out in pain as he hauled her bodily by the hair, his ironclad grip tearing strands free from her head. He lifted her off the ground and tossed her sprawling across the Uchiha's chest in a tangle of flailing limbs. Distantly, there was a noise of metal bouncing off stone. She had dropped the knife when he'd thrown her.

"Take the knife." A rough hand shoved the accursed knife back into her hand, whether it was the same one she'd dropped she didn't know and didn't care.

Sakura peeled herself off Sasuke's chest. This was usually something that only happened only in her dreams; only now that it was actually real, it wasn't nearly in the way it had imagined it. Everything had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

The knife shook in her hand as she held it above Sasuke's flesh. Tears were flowing freely from her eyes now, blurring her vision. Behind her she could practically feel the evil man hovering above her.

"I can't do it!" She wailed, dropping the knife and sinking to her knees, wishing this nightmare would hurry up and end.

There was a sigh from behind her, a tinkle of metal, and then pain.

****Line Break****

Kakashi closed and locked the door behind him as he left cellblock seven. Blowing out a breath, he tossed his blood-soaked gloves into a corner waste-bin marked biohazard. Groaning, Kakashi ran his hands down his face, exhaustion settling into his bones.

He'd always had a talent for interrogation. He was no Anko or Ibiki in this area, but his natural sadism gained in the Third Shinobi Great War lent him a certain creativity when it came to inflicting harm on his fellow man. As an assassin, whose entire job revolved around getting in, neutralizing the target silently, and getting out - it was rare for him to ever exercise this aspect of his considerable array of talents.

He pulled back his robes and checked his watch. It was a few years old and had cost a fortune. He had acquired it off the corpse of a rich Iwa noble he'd been hired to eliminate. Spoils of war and all that.

Half-past midnight, he thought. The wax from the candle has probably done its number on Naruto's legs by now. It was almost time for the second phase of his rotation. Sakura and Sasuke he had tied up to separate chairs.

They had surprised him, honestly. The noble, Sasuke, had endured more of a beating than he'd expected before finally blacking out, and he'd expected Sakura to take the knife to her prospective teammate to avoid the fate herself.

"Ah well, there is always tomorrow."

He'd followed through with his threat, of course. It had been messy, and he'd had to be careful so as to avoid future scaring in case that counted as permanent harm, but it hadn't taken long for her to pass out from the shock. Before that, the girl had quite the pair of lungs on her. His ears were still ringing.

Blowing out another breath, he began walking down the narrow corridor, passing by a few shelves that contained dried food meant for prisoners. It had been specially designed so that it was disgusting to swallow, hard to digest, but still provided enough nutrients to keep the victim alive. He'd have to grab a few of the packages tomorrow.

It was a delicate balance he had to strike, keeping them starved enough so that they'd feel cramped, but not so much that they lost muscle or risked permanent injury. He could practically feel Sarutobi's axe hovering over his neck waiting for the moment he slipped up. The Hokage had a reputation for being overly forgiving, but Kakashi knew otherwise.

He turned and pushed open a door, entering into a small room occupied only by a couple of tables stocked with sharp, pointy objects, and his black bag full of even more sharp and pointy things.

He stepped over to the bag and withdrew two iron cuffs attached to a single chain. At the end of the chain, there was a rod; similar to the ones he'd used to secure Sasuke to the floor. It was a few feet long and this one's loop was far larger and had spikes that pointed inwards. It looked kind of like an inverted dog's collar usually worn around some of Inuzuka's more aggressive dogs whose names were usually 'spike' or 'killer'. There was a clasp that allowed the metal loop to open, an aspect that would be important for later.

Five minutes and he was breezing through Naruto's door.

"You fuck!" Naruto roared from where he was still seated.

There it was, as sure as sniper fire.

The candle had long since burned out, leaving his master's son's legs bloody and an inflamed red from where the wax had melted and bonded to his skin. Surprisingly, there were no tear tracks on his face.

In any case, best to get this over with quickly.

Kakashi strode across the room and lifted the blond bodily from the chair by the lapel of his jumper. The kid hissed in pain as the wax

cracked as his legs bumped against the back of the chair. Kakashi continued to move drag him forward, releasing the boy's lapel briefly to grab him by the throat.

He slammed the boy against the wall, making sure that the back of his head cracked against the concrete hard enough to stun him. He took a quick estimation of Naruto's height and renewed his grip on the rod, flicked the clasp open, took aim and slammed the rod end into the wall so that the loop was a few feet away from the concrete.

He positioned the still stunned Naruto's neck inside the open loop and closed the clasp. The boy's hands were still bound behind his back, carefully done in such a way that he couldn't make handsigns or free himself. A lifetime's skill put in practice.

He released Naruto and the boy tried to fall to the ground, only to yowl in pain as the spikes cut into this neck. Kakashi helped the boy right himself in the device, this time making sure that the boy understood the consequences of not standing on his own. A task made difficult by the burned legs.

"You fuck." The boy hissed again, glaring at him heatedly.

Kakashi noticed that the boy was careful not to move his jaw too much or otherwise tempt the waiting spikes. A quick body-learner then. That's good. It was useful to know if they boy actually made it through his little test. And there was a way to pass, the boy had only to choose to. Konoha valued its freedom, after all.

"I knew you'd warm to my second name." Kakashi said, smiling down at the boy and throwing him a friendly wink. "Now if you'll excuse me, it's getting late and I have to get some shut-eye. Early morning and all that."

He turned and walked to the door, and then turned back. He couldn't resist one more passing taunt. "Have a nice night."

Kakashi left, making sure to lock the door. He doubted that the boy was going to be able escape, but prudence was the better part of valor in all situations. There was an old adage in the ANBU corps: when victorious, tighten your armor.

He returned to the room where he kept his black pack. Pushing it to one end of the metal table it was resting on, he hoisted himself up and lay down.

It was an early morning, he reasoned to himself. There wasn't a point in running all the way home, getting a few hours shuteye and then coming back. He would start again with Sasuke. The Uchiha would still be mending, chemical accelerants or not. He'd have to heal them all a bit in their sleep tomorrow evening, but a genjutsu should conceal his presence.

Hatake Kakashi, jounin of Konoha, torturer of children for their own good, and potential dead man walking, fell asleep.

****Line Break****

Sakura's crying was a quiet thing.

For that, Sasuke was grateful. He couldn't see what state whoever had done this to him had left her; his eyes were sealed shut by swelling. Every muscle, every fiber of his being ached from what was undoubtedly the worst beating of his life. The only satisfaction he could gleam from the experience was that aside from the occasional hiss or grunt, he'd never given his tormentor the satisfaction of hearing him scream in agony. A angry bellow was the worst he got.

His name was hatred, for reasons they both knew.

This wouldn't break him. Once Konoha noticed his absence they would mount a rescue. He was their last Uchiha, their golden child. As the last of his once mighty clan he was invaluable to them. Only he could restart the bloodline in the village.

His name was worthless, like he was told he once was.

Once he was free of this place, he would be strengthened from the victory. That strength would be the fuel to burn and put an end to his clan's killer. It was his duty as the only remaining sane clan member in his family. His parents, his friends, and his distant relatives would be avenged.

His name was empty, because he drained away the love.

Sasuke strained against his bindings, sucking in a breath as the wire cut into his flesh. Hissing in annoyance at the wire's resistance, he relaxed. He needed to conserve energy for later. Exhausting himself at this point would serve no purpose.

His name was revenge, for the crime he once saw.

****End of Chapter One****

3. Chapter 2

****A/N: Boomdeyasha****

****Chapter Two****

****Inclined to Dream****

"Good morning." Kakashi boomed, pushing open the door to the duo's cell.

He had expected a chilly reception, but if looks could kill, he'd be a smoldering stain on the wall.

Sasuke and Sakura were exactly how he left them: sitting in chairs tied on opposite ends of the room, their arms pinioned to their sides and legs firmly shackled in place. Kakashi was a cautious man. He didn't want them to get any funny ideas of bouncing their way to each other and somehow negotiating their freedom from the steel ninja wire.

"What do you want?" Sasuke asked with a surprisingly collected voice, considering his face looked like something out of a 'worst of' picture for people who'd recently taken a tumble off a cliff. "If it's money, I have plenty of it. Release me and I'll be sure that

whatever you want is yours."

Kakashi made a show of pretending to think about it. He scratched his chin with one hand, averted the one eye they could see to the side in mock contemplation. He even thumbed the lining of his pocket. He always was inclined to offer that greatest of all treasures, hope, to anyone in need.

And indeed, there it was. Buried underneath the Uchiha's bloodied face and moody exterior, past the wall of natural cynicism, there was a shiny gleam of that precious emotion.

"Sorry, I've got all the money I need. I'm just here to ask questions, have fun, and maybe break a few bones." Kakashi tittered, walking up to stand in front of where Sasuke sat.

The gleam flickered.

Kakashi had to admit; the Uchiha had put up a strong front considering his age. The boy sat rigid in his seat, black eyes fixed on Kakashi's brown one with a silent challenge. Kakashi wondered how long it would take for that fire to smolder and die. The thing about fire was that it tended to consume all the fuel as rapidly as possible.

He crouched down before the Uchiha and withdrew a roll of leather, setting it on the ground and undoing the strip of razor wire. With a push, the leather bundle unrolled revealing a selection of small needles of varying metals and thickness. Selecting a brass one, he held it up before the Uchiha whose eyes locked onto the pin with hawkish intensity.

"We're going to play a game, Sasuke." Kakashi said cheerfully. "You're going to play too, Sakura." A groan sounded from behind him.

He looked the Uchiha in the eyes and said, "I'm going to ask Sakura a question, and if she can't answer correctly then I'm going to stick this someplace you don't want me to. We're going to repeat this process until I'm out of needles, and after that the fun is really going to begin."

Kakashi poised the needle under Sasuke's right ankle, between the tendon and the bone.

"Sakura, what is Sasuke's brother's name?" He asked, turning to look at the bewildered girl. Her face, arms, and legs were a latticework of cuts from yesterday's session; pink hair dyed a deeper color and clumped by dried blood.

It was fascinating. He could practically feel the heat from Sasuke's glare, even more intense than when he'd entered. Maybe he wouldn't get to teach this team if they passed this little test of his, after all. Their hatred was pretty much guaranteed in any event, but he'd earn a special place of loathing in the Uchiha's heart after this.

"Sasuke has a brother?"

Wrong answer.

Sasuke grunted as the brass passed easily through flesh and out the other side.

"Stop hurting him!" Sakura yelled.

"Why?" Kakashi asked, genuinely curious of her answer.

"It's not right! You can't just do this to another person!"

"Why not?" Kakashi shot back. "Neither of you have the power to stop me. You have nothing to offer that I want or need."

"Then why are you doing this?" Sakura sobbed, fresh tears welling up in her eyes.

Kakashi hesitated. Civilian questions always threw him for a loop.

"Because I can; because it needs to be done; because I have the skill to do it." He wasn't lying, not really.

"You're a monster." Sakura gasped, and for the first time she met his eye. He could almost see the realization dawning.

"No," Kakashi corrected. "I'm a shinobi, a tool, and human being. This is what shinobi do. Human beings are capable of many things, and games of Ninja Tag are best left behind when entering the academy. You were warned."

He withdrew another needle from his roll, copper this time, with finely serrated edges, and pressed it against the same place as last time on Sasuke's left foot.

"I have two-hundred and seventy-four needles left. Where is Sasuke's brother located right now?"

Sakura's face drained of what little color it had left, a tear fell from her left eye. "Konoha," she said breathlessly.

"Incorrect." Kakashi said and pushed. Another grunt of pain.

He withdrew a steel pin and pressed it under the toenail of Sasuke's left big toe.

"What is the shinobi code regarding testing procedures of instantiated militants during peace and wartime regulations."

His question was greeted by a blank, uncomprehending look.

"Failure to answer the question within ten seconds is an automatic fail, I should warn you."

"I don't know." She whispered. The tears were falling freely now.

Kakashi pushed.

The answer to the question, strangely worded as it was, is that the testing jounin "in this case him" were required to test the

aspiring genin's ingenuity, teamwork, and skills in combat. There were a few provisions, such as the prohibition of death and debilitating injury, but there was no list of concrete tests to be given.

Kakashi could have gone with the old bell test that he was given by his instructor. It was cheap, underhanded, and forced the genin to regard each other as competitors. In that spirit they'd work against each other to claim the 'two spots available' by snatching one of the two bells to be dangling just outside of their grasp.

Once they'd failed, a second, unstated test would then be given after tying the worst of them to a poll. Food would be given to two of the three with express orders that the one without food was to remain without food. If they broke that and selfishly gave up some of their meal to help their compatriot, then they passed.

The problem, as Kakashi saw it, was that test was ultimately intended to pass the genin. He didn't want a genin squad. So, he had to make it to where they didn't want to be genin anymore. Cruel, yes. But then life was cruel, a shinobi's life even more so. Ibiki's favorite party trick was taking off his hat and showing the intricate network of scars on his head from torturers who didn't care if permanent harm was done.

Kakashi selected a long, thin, zinc pin and repeated the gesture for the right toe.

"What is the average rainfall in Suna's forty-eighth satellite providence per year?" This was a dirty trick, as Suna didn't have a forty-eighth satellite. They had only forty-four.

"There isn't one." Sakura replied mechanically, her face strangely rigid. "There are only forty-four, Takahali being inducted four years after the Third Shinobi War."

Kakashi blinked in surprise. Where had that come from?

"Correct." He set the pin down by Sasuke's foot and selected another one. "Two-hundred and seventy one left to go."

****Line Break****

His ears were ringing again.

"Sasuke, what is Sakura's favorite color?" Kakashi asked as he touched one of the metal pins in Sakura's shoulder. A bit of lightning chakra and the girl's body tensed involuntarily as electricity coursed through her body.

This part of the proceedings was always tricky. He had to get just the right amount of chakra in the charge so as to make it sufficiently painful, but not too much as to cause permanent muscle or nerve damage.

Kakashi released the flow of chakra and was treated to another earsplitting wail of agony from the diminutive pink-haired girl strapped to the chair in front of where he was kneeling. Eventually, the howl tapered off to a weak whimper.

"Pink." Sasuke spat out resentfully.

It had taken some work to get the Uchiha to say anything. He'd gone through twenty-one needs before the Sasuke had said anything at all. Whether it was his natural need to be silent, his bitterness at Sakura for get one hundred and seventy-six needle questions wrong, or if he just enjoyed seeing others in pain, Kakashi wasn't sure at first. It wasn't until Sasuke, his face twisting up with the effort, blurted out an incorrect answer that Kakashi realized that the Uchiha was hoping that the focus of his attentions would turn back to him in retribution for not answering.

It was noble, in a stupid kind of way. Kakashi was a man of his word. He lived his life by very strict guidelines. He never abandoned his comrades, never failed a mission, and never told a fellow countryman a lie. So if he said he was going to do something, then he was going to do that thing come hell or high water.

"Incorrect." Kakashi stated blandly.

He applied the lightning jutsu to the needle in her abdomen. After a twenty-seconds of current he released his technique and braced himself for the expected wail and wasn't disappointed when it came. It reverberated around the cell like a banshee's cry, causing his eardrums to attempt to seek shelter by furrowing into his brain.

"How long is the standard time for a shinobi to pass through Konoha's academy?"

"Four years."

Kakashi nodded and removed seven needles and dropped them into a glass of alcohol cleansing solution he'd placed by the left foot of Sakura's chair.

"And did you never bother to learn your fellow classmates and potential teammates likes and dislikes?"

Sasuke hesitated, obviously trying to figure out if that was a question or not. Eventually he settled on answering with a, "No."

Kakashi withdrew ten needles this time, she only had a few left inside of her. All over her body there were tiny perforations and rivulets of blood marking where a needle had been.

"What is Uzumaki Naruto's hair color?"

"Orange."

>"Incorrect." Sakura issued another scream as he brushed the needle protruding from her left bicep with a casual wave.<p>

"What is his dream?"

This time Sasuke snorted, as if enjoying some private joke. "To become Hokage."

Six more needles joined the others in the jar with soft plops.

"What color is Aburame Shino's eye color?"

"Brown."

"Incorrect."

Kakashi watched Sasuke wince as Sakura screamed once more. He wondered vaguely what was going on in that brain of his. The Uchiha's psych profile had been a comprised mostly of useless speculation mixed in with a few tid-bits of relevant data. Apparently, a Mind Walk from a Yamanaka had been deemed to dangerous to attempt after the Sasuke's brother had so thoroughly scrambled his mind using a new technique with an unprecedented amount power behind it.

Why an attempt hadn't been made after a few years, he didn't know. Kakashi could only attribute the gross lax of duty to an overwhelming amount bullshit on the Uchiha's part. The one-on-one interviews showed a well adjusted and mentally stable individual. And Kakashi supposed that an outsider to traumatized people might believe that.

A certain degree of moodiness, a disinterest in others, was to be expected. Sasuke was clever enough to take in certain traits, a few personality quirks, and was probably smooth-tongued enough in a prepared setting that he could pass this knowledge off as relevant and insightful. But under the strain he was currently in combined with the questions that many would consider too obvious, or were impossible to answer, the Uchiha was drawing blanks or simply taking shots in the dark.

No, Kakashi recognized a budding sociopath when he saw one. He saw the real deal almost every day in the mirror. Maybe he was being harsh on himself, but he knew enough to realize that you didn't get into the assassination business on charming character and a love for others alone.

"What will you do when you become your brother?"

Sasuke's lip curled in anger, his eyes burning with hurt pride and indignant fury."

"I am not my brother."

>"Incorrect."<p>

Sasuke's retort was cut off by Sakura's screams as Kakashi removed that last ten needles slowly, channeling fire chakra through each one so that they heated up and burned red, cauterizing the wound as he pulled them free.

"Have a good evening." Kakashi said curtly, picking up his jar of needles and exited the room, hearing Sakura's sobs and feeling Sasuke's silent loathing behind him as he left.

****Line Break****

Time had a eulogy rarely sung. You could hear it, if you cared enough to listen. To some, it was mournful, full of lost regrets and broken promises. To others, it was full of chirping birds and floss candy. To Sarutobi Hiruzen, it sounded vaguely like shuffling papers or a

rasping pen.

He was sitting at his desk chasing shadows. They were everywhere, if you looked close enough. Hidden in folders, whispered on bated breaths, and stuffed in manila envelopes that hadn't seen the light of day in decades. Shadows, Sarutobi had learned, were a bit like weeds in that you had to pull them out by the roots lest they crop up again with renewed strength.

He chuckled dustily at his own joke, an action that caused Kakashi standing across the table from him to shift uneasily from foot to foot. He could almost see Kakashi's nervousness as a palpable aura around him. It gave him a certain pleasure to see the man currently tormenting teenagers uncomfortable.

"Where are you now?" He asked, not unkindly. It was always best to appear friendly, even if you were planning on disemboweling someone in the near future.

The clone of Kakashi checked his watch. "Probably just finishing up with Sasuke and Sakura, moving to have a chat with Naruto. I've set the seeds and now I have to see if they will let them grow." He replied.

"I do not approve of what you are doing, Jounin Hatake." Sarutobi said steadily, setting down his pen and looking up at his subordinate sternly. "You've twisted what is supposed to be a bonding moment between master and students. They will probably never trust you, the foundation the relationship will be inherently broken."

"Assuming they pass." Kakashi shot back evasively.

"Yes," Sarutobi hummed, "I am not a fool, Hatake. I saw what you were doing the moment I read your initial report. It is not a matter of passing. It is a matter of whether or not they will have the will to do anything once you are finished. Fully trained men have broken under less, Hatake."

"You forced me to this," Kakashi muttered defensively. "It is not my fault that the rules for testing jounin are lax."

"An oversight that has been rectified for future cases, though I doubt it will be necessary. Almost a hundred years this village has been standing and never has a jounin tried to actually break their students' will in this manner. It should hardly need to be said, but I am disappointed in you, Hatake."

"You can end this at any moment, you have only to give the order." Kakashi pointed out.

"Yes, I can have you executed. That will end it quite neatly, satisfyingly for almost everyone involved as well."

"Not for me." Sarutobi heard Kakashi burble under his breath.

"I'm not going to stop you." Sarutobi said, returning to his work and pulling another sheet off his stack. "They will pass your little test."

"Permission to speak freely?" Kakashi asked.

"You usually do, but it is granted nonetheless."

"They aren't going to." Kakashi stated flatly. "They are children, ordinary ones as well. By the time I was their age, I was already a jounin with more completed A rank missions in my file than most accrue in a decade."

"I think you will be surprised by the ordinary. It is the average man that moves mountains, I find. It shouldn't be. It goes against conventional sense, but I've seen it more than a dozen times. It's in the details, the shadows if you will, that greatness is made."

Kakashi blinked unbelievably.

Sarutobi hummed. "I suppose it's to be expected, you are still young after all. The world is an open book."

"Am I dismissed, sir?" Kakashi asked. "I'm going to be needing the chakra soon."

"Yes, yes." Sarutobi waved. "You are dismissed."

The clone 'popped' decomposing into smoke and vaporous trails of chakra.

Kakashi would learn. Rather, Sarutobi guessed that Kakashi would learn. If he was wrong, Kakashi wouldn't learn much beyond the fact that Sarutobi was a man of his word. He never assigned a mission he didn't think the team could accomplish. He never left a loyal shinobi rot behind enemy lines. And he never reneged on a promise.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter." Sarutobi called.

The doors opened and the rhythmic thump of cane against carpet resounded in the room.

****Line Break****

She was a human being. She was a human being. She was a human being.

The well-worn and repeated mantra ran through her head over and over again, repeating ad nauseum in rapid succession.

She didn't want to feel the knives, not again. According to their nameless tormentor, it had been four days. She didn't believe him, couldn't believe him. It had been an eternity, all condensed down into a heartbeat that never rested.

The knife was slick in her hands, trembling erratically with each shuttering breath that burned her chemically saturated lungs. She couldn't steady it. Her own mind was the enemy here and the rest of her was ill equipped to fight it. She could reduce her own suffering if only she had the guts. She didn't need to suffer like she did.

Beneath the trembling point of her weapon, Sasuke lay prostrate, the small of his back pressed into an arch over the stool she was tied to each time their tormentor left them. His arms and legs were being pulled by the ropes anchored into the ground by the four loops.

He was awake this time, and he was staring at her with a blank expression on his once pretty face. A new set of bruises had been added to the old ones, making his face appear more as one big purple color than flesh toned. His black hair was caked to his head by blood and sweat.

The demon spoke, his honeyed voice laced with mock charity. "While we wait, would you like a history lesson?"

Sakura whimpered, not daring to look up at where she knew the evil man would be leaning against the wall, watching her with that single damnable eye of his.

"The Iwan press was invented during the Second Shinobi War. No one knows who truly invented it as the contraption just kind of sprung into being. The reason it is called the Iwan press is because it was Iwa who created the most innovative variants. You see, when a detainee is captured, they are usually placed in a metal chair that can be raised or lowered. Their legs and arms are secured to the metal seat while the back of the chair is pulled back and down toward the ground. This causes severe stress on the spine, neck, and other limbs."

The nameless demon sighed theatrically, "Unfortunately for dear Sasuke here I'm on a budget. While I'm sure he will take great solace the fact that this won't cause him any permanent damage, that might be overshadowed by the excruciating pain he's in right now."

She heard the sound of shifting robes as the demon moved to stand beside her. A black-gloved hand curled under her chin and forced her to look away from Sasuke's eyes and into the demon's one. She looked to the side, anywhere but that falsely sincere eye.

"Three times we've been here; three times I've offered the chance of escaping pain for a brief few hours. All you have to do is hurt your friend here. You don't have to worry, no one will know. No one will judge you."

The hand released her and she heard him walk away.

Like a magnet, her gaze was drawn back to Sasuke's tired eyes. She had never thought he would look so vulnerable. He was the last Uchiha! Destined for greatness and adventure! She had wanted to share in each of them. It was a dream come true when she'd been placed on the same team. Only now the adventure was sour before it could even begin. She wanted nothing more than to be in her bed, sleeping. No worries, no pains, no fear.

She could cut her own throat. It would be easy.

The invasive thought came suddenly and echoed in her head like some whispering specter, lingering far longer than it should before truly sinking in.

She closed her eyes and her trembling stilled. One neat line across

the jugular or a quick plunge in the eye and she'd finally be in a place where the demon couldn't find her, where the worlds shutters came to a close and it was bedtime for eternity.

"Just do it."

That hadn't been the demon's voice or her own head turned against her. There had been a pained tightness to it that the demon's didn't have. Her eyes shot open and latched onto the Uchiha's with desperate intensity. He wasn't looking at her anymore. He had closed his eyes and turned his head away.

"Just do it," he repeated, the strain of not screaming coloring his voice like a four-year-olds rendition of a flower garden. It was probably the first thing he'd said voluntarily since he'd tried bartering for his freedom when they'd first encountered the demon.

"Sasuke!" she whispered. "I can't do-"

"Shut up and get it over with, you stupid bitch!" Sasuke tried to shout, his voice cracking half way through and losing power. The voice sounded wrong, weak. The thought of that tone coming from her Uchiha was an anathema to her.

Something snapped, and that something was a hinge that had been the linchpin that had been holding her illusions in place. The sleep deprivation, partial starvation, and constant agony had all piled up on the foundation of Sasuke's invincibility and power to protect her, only for that foundation to be snatched out from underneath her.

Her face twisted and she swung, drawing a long red line across Sasuke's chest. The blade was small, barely longer than a pensile tip, but she swung it with such force that she managed to bounce it off a rib.

Everything went red and she lost track of time. When she finally regained her senses, Sasuke's body was a tracery of cuts and even a single stab wound in his shoulder.

"Fascinating."

Sakura jumped. When had the demon moved to stand beside her? She spun to look at him, starting in surprise to see that he'd pulled his mask down from his nose.

He was handsome, with an angular jawline and clean-shaven face. She had always pictured him as having been deformed by scarring, or possessing something more akin to a void filled with teeth than a mouth.

It was because she wanted there to be something wrong to have twisted him into the creature that he was today, able to so easily do things that any reasonable person wouldn't even consider. It was much better for her to imagine him as some creature that stalked the night for fear that the light of day would reveal him as the monster he was to all fair-minded folk. She had clung to this image, because if she hadn't, then she might have to face the fact that bad things could be done by ordinary people - the kind of people who pet the dog while sipping at a brandy and reading a story to the kids at night. People

who she might interact with on a daily basis; who after finishing up with their shopping then went home and did terrible things to other ordinary people.

Sakura stared at him, her face slowly losing all tension as a truth dawned on her. That truth was that it was so much easier to blame everything on Them. It was difficult to believe that They could just as easily be have been Her. It was only time and circumstance that made Her into one of Us. It stood to reason that Us could easily become Them. The problem with everything was that it was Them who did that bad things.

The shinobi turned to look at her and smiled a smile so bright it could have outshone the sun. She couldn't think of him as a demon anymore. He was just a human being capable of doing terrible things.

She was a human being, too.

****Line Break****

YÅ«hi Kurenai was enjoying herself. It wasn't every day that you got to visit the Hokage's office, even if it was on official business. Ten years ago, the thought of standing before the overlord of the city for anything other than her execution hadn't occurred to her. Back then, she'd been a dirty-face street urchin running games and relieving people of their spare change.

She still kept a glass bauble that was almost a diamond sewn into the collar of her red vest. Old habits died hard.

Arrayed alongside her in front of the Hokage's desk was a selection of some of the best Jounin Konoha had to offer. They had all been called here to tell the Hokage personally if the team they were requested to pass their skills onto were up to the job.

"Team four passes." A short, stumpy man with a green cardigan said in a surprisingly high pitched and squeaky voice. He sounded a bit like an Inuzuka hound's chew toy.

Lord Sarutobi Hiruzen made a note on his ledger.

Kurenai wriggled her toes in anticipation. As far as jounin went, she was probably the most junior member in the room, and she'd been selected to lead a team. She was aglow with ideas, and almost quivering with the joy of being able to carry them out.

There was a saying: You couldn't fool an honest Shinobi. She had often heard that quoted by dishonest men showing honest men something shiny they'd just pulled out of their coats.

She'd never tried it. Fooling dishonest men had been her game growing up. It had somehow seemed more sporting, and in Konoha's noble marketplace she'd hardly had to aim. Becoming a shinobi herself had seemed like the next logical step. It helped that her only friend had somehow caught the interest of one of the Sannin. After that, she'd found herself with a lot of time on her hands and a book of genjutsu pilfered from the library. She had taken to it like a duck to water.

"Team five passes," Said a smoke cloud. There was quite a bit of speculation if there was actually a person in the center of the black vapor, and had garnered the focus of quite a sizable betting pool in the right circles.

Kurenai checked her white, sleeveless vest that rested over a red undershirt. Both were new, purchased just the other day. She was a sensei now; she had to look the part. Illusions were based upon expectations. If you expected a serious, well-minded and well-adjusted sensei, then you were most likely going to get one. She was merely helping those expectations along.

For her test she had given her students a map to where they could find her. It had been a good map. And in studying it, her students had learned a lot about decryption, geography, and devious cartography. It had taken them the better part of the day, and more than a little help from the library and a few passing shinobi that they hadn't realized were her, before realizing that the map was a complete and complex fiction. They had found her where they had started that morning.

Now that she had them hooked, she just had to keep the con running. Oh, the games she could play and the tricks she could teach them.

"Team six failed." Said a man who appeared to be constantly inverting in on himself.

Kurenai straightened up to attention, brushing back a lock of her long black hair. It was almost her turn.

She froze, becoming acutely aware that the room was staring at her. She was caught slightly flat-footed by the sudden attention. However, she rallied quickly and ran the numbers through her head. Yes, the count had certainly stopped at six.

She looked around and noticed that Kakashi was absent.

"Team eight passes." She hadn't meant for it to sound like a question, but she was a bit flustered at being so suddenly on the spot.

Sarutobi's pen slowed to a stop and he looked up at her critically. "I'm not sure why you are asking me." The patrician said, "It was you who tested them."

Kurenai nodded, reasserting herself. If you looked collected, calm, and poised, then people tended to believe that you were collected, calm, and poised. If you managed to really sell the illusion, then you would believe it yourself.

"Team eight passed." She said firmly.

"As did team ten," Said Sarutobi Asuma, not waiting for his turn to declare his team.

He was smoking a cigarette and sporting freshly a clipped beard. Aside from Kakashi, this was the only other man in the room she knew the name of, being the Hokage's son.

"Hey, where's Kakashi?" Sarutobi asked, waving the cigarette he'd been smoking and displaying a complete lack of social tact considering where they were.

Kurenai shuffled a bit to the side, just in case the Hokage decided that one grandson was all that he really needed.

"He is indisposed at the moment." Sarutobi replied tersely, making a mark on his ledger.

"That lazyâ€¦" Asuma trailed off, sounding distinctly jealous.

"He is still testing his team, as he has been for the past three days. He will report his findings to me when he is satisfied with the results." Sarutobi informed them.

This drew the proper amount of raised eyebrows and murmured questions around the room. Tests traditionally took a few hours, half a day if you wanted to be extra cruel or lazy, whichever the case may be. Three days took laxness a bit too far in anyone's book.

"Isn't this a bit unorthodox?" The smoke cloud asked, voicing what everyone was thinking.

"Team eleven is still in rotation, so that matter is already settled," The Hokage continued, moving comfortably past the question. "You are all dismissed."

Kurenai followed the other jounin from the room, pondering what it meant for Kakashi to be taking so long. She had spoken with the jounin a few times, and had heard more than a fair share of rumors. Most of which she figured were nonsense, made up by people who had more time than sense.

But one thing she was sure of that she'd gleaned from their stilted conversations was this: if you didn't manage to make it on the silver haired jounin's radar, then he hardly gave you the time of day. He preferred to read his book, if he wasn't being explicitly asked to do something or was preoccupied.

This team must really be special to have garnered his attention for him to be testing them so thoroughly. Perhaps this would be the first team he would pass willingly.

****Line Break****

Naruto had to admit that he didn't particularly enjoy the silence. He was a boy of compulsory action. This constant hanging around was an anathema to him. But what was he to do? His hands were literally tied in this manner.

He hung rigidly in place, eyes close, arms straining to break the manacles around his wrists. So far he'd succeeded in only slicing the back of his wrists a few times, but the trick to everything was determination. Persistence: that was the correct word.

He shifted his weight from one arm to the other. The lacerations that fucker had left him with had mostly healed by now. He'd lost track of how many times Kakashi had come in, asking stupid philosophical questions, all the while beating him.

Naruto had to repress a smirk at the thought. That shinobi had no idea who he was dealing with. He was no stranger to pain. He was, after all, very clumsy. And with that clumsiness came a certain degree of self-inflicted injury. Pinpricks sewing his clothes back together, broken toes stubbing on the edge of his bed, and accidentally setting his left arm of fire trying to make ramen over a stove. That had taken a bit of explaining away at the hospital.

All of this cumulated in a rather profound understanding of temporary pain, and most pain was indeed temporary. He had always been quick on recovering. At first that had mystified now, though now he supposed he had an answer to that little conundrum. The Kyuubi.

What are you?

Naruto snorted at Kakashi's favorite question. The answer to that one was obvious. He was Naruto Uzumaki, future Hokage, all around badass. The question hardly bore thinking about. Escape was the main priority. Then, after freedom, he could teach his abductor a thing or two.

Really, forcing him to hang by his wrists? He was used to punishments like this. He'd been made to stand in the corner for ages back at the academy. Granted, he usually deserved that punishment. Laxatives in the teacher's lounge coffee pot and itching powder sprinkled on the faculty bathroom's toilet seats, while grand in design, suffered from a severe underestimation in the area of video cameras and motion detection software. Who knew the academy had a budget like that? Electronic items were stupidly expensive.

Naruto's ears perked at the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. Kami bless his keen ears. He composed himself, making sure that his confident smirk was firmly in place. This place wasn't going to conquer him. The Hokage had doubtlessly noticed his absence and was mounting a search and rescue operation at the very moment.

The door swung open and a grinning Kakashi entered the room, at least Naruto assumed the man was grinning. It was difficult to tell. He had to guess by the amusement dancing in the Cyclopes' one visible eye.

That was when Naruto noticed the sledge hammer Kakashi had slung over his shoulder. The demented man formed a Seal with the hand that wasn't holding the hammer and he felt the spiked chains click open.

He hit the floor like a landed fish.

Naruto knew that he wasn't the quickest on the uptake. He had often been compared to a retarded ant, but that was no matter. It didn't take much too put two and sledgehammer together and get the gist of what was about to happen. When a man who'd already done you some damage in the past comes bursting into a room grinning like a loon and wielding a tool whose business end was approximately the size of a basketball and looked like it weighed about as much as a small city, you tend to put things together very fast.

Naruto bolted for the door the weapon-bearing madman had left open behind him. In retrospect, this was a terrible idea. It only hastened

the time it took for the meteor-like steel head of the sledgehammer to crack his shin like a ripe banana.

Naruto hit the ground hard, keening as he wrapped his arms around his leg as though it would actually help.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting." The silver monster said cheerfully. Through the tears in his eyes, Naruto could just make out the demon in human form dropping the head of the oversized hammer and using the handle as a chin rest as he looked down at him with a bemused eye. "Do you have an answer for me?"

Through the haze of pain, Naruto briefly wondered if he could do something with the Kyuubi. Get a nice power up, heat up the room and fry the jounin—release the damn thing and watching with great delight as it devoured the smug silver haired fucker.

He discarded the idea as fanciful. For one, he hadn't heard the chuckling in his head since he'd been brought here. And for two, he didn't know how. He suspected Kakashi wasn't going to give him the time and resources to figure it out.

"Something funny?" Kakashi asked.

"No," Naruto grit out between his teeth. The pain in his legs was settling down from mind-blowing agony to a mere head splitting trauma.

"What's your answer then?" Kakashi asked, tilting his head to one side, like a bird that's found something glinting in the sun.

"I'm me," Naruto spat, "I'm going to be Hokage. But first, I'm going to get out of here and then rip your arms from your body and beat you to death with them."

"So you want freedom, then?"

Naruto glared at the one-eyed man. "What are you, stupid?" He asked. "Of course I want freedom."

"Why?"

Naruto was brought up short by the simple question. However, he quickly rallied himself in a burst of bravado. "Everyone wants freedom. No one should be able to keep someone against their will."

"Ah, so you are inclined to dream."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Naruto asked heatedly. His dream to become Hokage was going to become a reality. No two bit, eye-deficient loser was going to tell him otherwise.

"The question seems pretty simple," the man replied. "I'm asking what you think about yourself, and who you actually are?"

Naruto floundered for a moment, before finally returning, "I'm me."

"Ah, logic as circular as the moon," Kakashi chuckled. "But what does

the word mean to you? You are Konoha's little experiment. Can their little Kyuubi become a trained weapon, or an explosive note ready to be detonated where it would do the most damage? Let me ask you this: do you have any friends? Or are they all frightened off by the sound of shackles you drag around with you?"

Naruto stiffened, the pain in his leg seemed to be fading faster, but he was too angry to care at the moment. A moron was talking like he knew what he was going on about, and if he wasn't careful, he was going to get his face torn off shortly.

Kakashi closed his eye in a strange facsimile of a smile and continued on, "No, I'm afraid freedom for you was never an option, only the illusion of freedom. Weapons are so much sharper if they're regularly ground to a point. Distractions, such as friends and family, are unnecessary. Did you ever find it strange that the Hokage was the only one you ever really connected with? The Hokage is just-"

Naruto lunged; hissing with feral indignation, arm extended outwards to grab at Kakashi's face. He roared, his vision going red, even as orange chakra began to pour of his body like vaporous mist.

The Hokage had bailed him out of more tight spots than he could count when his pranks had gone a bit too far, or when he'd been caught stealing to survive. This two bit ass-hole wasn't about to badmouth one of the reasons he was alive, not while he was still standing.

Kakashi's smile deepened.

****Line Break****

Kakashi easily sidestepped Naruto's wild strike. He planted a foot and drove the other one into the charging boy's sternum, feeling it crunch under the force. The boy was suspended in the air for a moment and Kakashi took advantage, driving an elbow into his back and sending him to the floor in a heap of limbs.

He stepped back, wincing slightly as he shook his arm. The chakra that was surrounding the boy was painful to touch. It seemed to bypass skin and irritate the nerves directly. A problem, but not one he hadn't foreseen. That was why he had brought the oversized hammer.

Naruto recovered quickly. Roaring with enough force that the air seemed to vibrate, the Jinchuuriki shot upright, eyes blazing a deep crimson. The boy's charge had been fast, faster than any genin should have been able to move. Kakashi noted that the boy's pupils had contracted into slits. The So that meant that the Kyuubi's chakra warped the boy physically, in more ways than just augmented strength. What other little surprises would they uncover in this little spat.

This time Kakashi brought the fight to the boy. He slid forward in a single, soundless movement, dark robes billowing out from around him like the edge of darkness. Naruto tried to intercept him with a haymaker. Smirking, Kakashi brought the head of his weapon up in a backhanded grip and let the boy slam his fist into it.

There was a crunching noise and this time the Jinchuuriki howled in pain, even as he took a swipe at Kakashi with his other open palm. Kakashi had to credit the boy with one thing: he was determined. Most people would have pulled back to nurse their wounds and gather themselves for another assault if possible. This Kyuubi driven Naruto didn't seem to have that inclination. Against another genin, the bull charge would have overwhelmed them; to Kakashi it was Tuesday.

Channeling chakra to his legs, Kakashi leapt, flipping over the boy and turning in the air. He wrapped one black-gloved hand around the Jinchuuriki's neck as he reached the crest of his jump. With a push, he knocked the boy forward slightly, throwing him off balance, and allowing Kakashi to land directly on the back of the child's knees.

Twin cracks, each sounding as Naruto's knees hit the ground, driven there by the weight of Kakashi's body. The ex-ANBU captain had to resist completing the maneuver, a follow-through that would have ended terminally for the boy, enhanced regeneration or not. A broken neck and a fully swung hammer to the back of the skull would have splattered the walls with gray matter and blood.

Pressing off, being sure to grind the boy's bones into the concrete, Kakashi leapt again. This fight wasn't about ending his opponent. It was about breaking his will to ever fight again.

Naruto's chakra flared to new heights, and Kakashi had to twist in the air to avoid the clawed hand that shot out at him. As it was, the razor-like claws sheered through the hem of his robe as it fluttered past.

Kakashi hit the ground, rolling with the impact and gliding to his feet effortlessly. The boy was already standing.

So he heals faster with more of the fox's chakra, Kakashi thought, eyeing the boy. The increased speed was surprising, though not threatening. He just had to counter with a hike in speed of his own.

Chakra flooded through his body, washing away any aches the past week had built up in his shoulders and neck. While Kakashi's toy may be enhancing his strength through brute force of chakra alone, it wasn't enough to come close to the efficiency Kakashi employed to empower his movements.

Time for a game.

Kakashi sped towards a wall, pressing his foot against it and then running straight up until he was standing on the ceiling. He looked down to see a wide-eyed Naruto staring up at him with teeth bared, elongated canines poking over tight lips.

Spinning hammer in hand, Kakashi threw it towards the boy, thin trail of blue chakra connecting the weapon to Kakashi hand. Naruto threw himself to the side, acting on instinct more than expertise. The hammer hit the ground in a deafening explosion that sent chips of concrete whizzing through the air like angry bees.

With a whipping motion, Kakashi yanked the hammer back to him by the

string of chakra, a technique he'd stolen from a Suna puppet master. He threw it again and Naruto dodged again. This time, however, as Kakashi pulled his weapon back to him, Naruto managed to get hold of it and was yanked up as well.

Not bad, Kakashi thought as he dropped from the ceiling. He met the Jinchuuriki in the air, crashing down on top of him and batting the boy's clutching hands away. He pressed two knees on top of Naruto's chest and drove him into the ground as they hit.

Kakashi rolled off the boy's stunned and prone form. Summoning his weapon with a snap of his hand, he swung the weapon around and down onto the enraged Jinchuuriki's right arm. The hammer broke the arm effortlessly.

The thing about no permanent harm was that Jinchuuriki were capable of taking a much harsher beating and still come out swinging. It was annoying, yes; but it let him be a hell of a lot more vicious.

Naruto yowled in fury and shot to his feet, arm hanging loosely by his side. The chakra around his body seemed to coalesce, and a single orange-red tail formed of chakra, waving in agitation behind the boy.

Interesting, Kakashi thought, eyeing the new chakra construction while quickly formulating theories on what it symbolized. His first theory was that it meant he was now drawing on one-ninth of the Kyuubi's power, but he discarded that idea. The chakra wasn't nearly potent or tainted enough for that, unless it was exponential. So, control, then?

Naruto shot forward, even faster this time, damaged arm dragging in the air behind him as he ran. Kakashi spun to meet him, blocking the boy's punch with an open palm, stopping the Jinchuuriki cold. He brought his hammer around and swung it at the boy's head, intending to stun.

He was very surprised when, in a flash of red, the hammer was knocked from his grasp by the tail, which went on to slam into his chest. Chakra reinforcement made the blow negligible, but it was the mere fact that he hit him that surprised the jounin. Raw, unmolded chakra wasn't supposed to be able to act physically.

He grabbed the tail in the hand that once held the hammer, black-glove hissing and emitting smoke as he wrapped his fingers around the chakra construction. Using it for leverage, he flung the boy into the far wall, his body cracking the concrete with the force of his impact.

This had gone on long enough. With a handseal, Kakashi activated the Seal inscribed on the small of Naruto's back, a Seal he had deactivated just as he had entered the room.

The red chakra around the boy vanished, leaving an exhausted but otherwise mostly undamaged Jinchuuriki resting in the small crater he'd made in the wall. His eyes were drooping in exhaustion. Apparently, pulling on the Kyuubi's chakra left one drained afterwards.

"Even using the power of a creature that managed to level entire sectors and killed hundred of Konoha shinobi, you barely managed to cut my robes." Kakashi said in his usual mock cheerful tones, holding up the torn bit of robes for the boy to inspect. "And you want to become Hokage? You're barely worthy of licking my boots clean, boy."

Naruto tried to stir in his hole, but Kakashi broke off the head of his hammer and threw it. The steel head buried into the boy's stomach like the divine fist of god. Blood and spittle flew from his mouth and the boy struggled for breath.

"None of that now," Kakashi said, his voice becoming cold. "I'm talking, don't be rude."

Kakashi spun on the spot, folding his arms and showing his back to the downed foe. It was all about presentation. Show the target and make it believable that you are completely below their regard and they'll start to think that too.

"How can you expect to protect anyone, much less an entire village, if you give into your anger at the slightest provocation? Perhaps my organization and me were too hasty. We targeted you because there was the possibility that you may be a threat one day." He forced a derisive laugh. "We should have just let things be. The Hokage is old and reportedly has a bit of a soft spot for you. You are his one weakness. We should have simply tricked you into delivering a bomb. It would certainly have been easy enough. You practically fling yourself at anyone who looks at you with an expression even approaching kindness." There was a weak groan of protest behind him. "Who knows? Given enough time you might just lose your temper and attack the Hokage yourself. Either you or he will die, a victory for us either way."

Kakashi stepped over to the exit, stopping once he had a hand on the handle. "I'm leaving now. You've begun to bore me and I think it'll be best if you were left to rot here. Goodbye, little fox."

He made a handsign and heard Naruto's breath hitch in surprise. With a slight smile, he stepped through the door and closed it. He didn't lock the cell.

****Line Break****

Sasuke hung from the ceiling with his wrists bound behind his back, his own weight slowly pulling them from their sockets and his muscles fatigued. Sweat, grime, and blood coated his face like a mask as his hair hung in front of him like a bedraggled curtain.

His eyes were closed, though even if he opened them he wouldn't see anything. The darkness around him was absolute and impenetrable. As memory served, Sakura hung somewhere in the room with him. Neither of them had bothered speaking, each preferring to conserve energy.

He had endured torture before, three days inside his brother's illusionary world. During that time he had been shown, first hand, the murder of each of his clansman over and over again. He'd seen his mother and father's blood on his hands, watched their bodies crumple to the ground, and heard their strangled gasps for air as blood filled their lungs with each desperate breath.

One hundred-thousand eight hundred and twenty seven. One-hundred thousand eight hundred and twenty six. One thousand eight hundred and twenty five.

Counting was a trick he'd learned after the first two days in Itachi's illusions and had been serving him well here. Six counts, seven iterations, and four lost numbers; taking a estimation off that he figured that they'd been imprisoned for over a week at the very least, two days of which they'd been hanging here. His chakra was running out and he suspected that by tomorrow there would be little he could do to rebuff the pull of gravity. His arms would give out shortly after that.

"No one is coming to save us, are they?"

Sakura's languid question pierced the silence like a spear. Her voice was oddly calm, as though she were remarking on the weather or some other trivial detail.

Sasuke didn't answer, focusing on the count. The wound in his shoulder ached from where she had stabbed him. It had scabbed over and was leaking a sickly amber-white puss. Along his back were the trenches carved into his flesh when their nameless tormentor had instructed his would be pink-haired teammate to use a cat o' Ninetails on him.

"I'm sorry." She said, voice hanging limply in the thick air laced with the scent of iron.

"Forget about it." Sasuke grunted. One-hudred thousand two hundred and sixty nine. Two two six eight. Mix up the counting method, keep the mind off the pain. Two two six seven. Two two six six.

A hollow chuckle, devoid of humor, reverberated around the room, along with the sound of clinking metal as Sakura's fake mirth shook her chains.

"We're going to die here. So pathetic, I imagined greater."

Sasuke felt his lip curl in involuntary anger. That was the worst of this whole situation. His brother would never feel his wrath, because he'd be dead. The great Uchiha avenger, laid low by some one-eyed freak and left to rot in some stupid stone room. It was intolerable, and before a week ago - give or take a couple of days - it had been unthinkable.

"Blond." Sakura said to the silence. "Naruto's hair is blond."

Sasuke cracked his eyes open slightly, though it didn't change anything. So that was the color of his would-be teammate. He had barely paid attention at the time. Anything as loud as that particular nuisance he did his best to ignore. It seemed fitting, in a way, that with such a vibrant personality came an equally annoying hair color, a hair color that had caused him so much pain. Kakashi had asked him that question three times, and each time he had been unable to answer.

It would bring him no end of satisfaction to see the look on that

one-eyed fool's face when he got the question right.

"Sasuke, where is your brother?"

Sasuke grit his teeth. That was Sakura's repeated question. A question in which he couldn't provide an adequate answer.

"I don't know." He hissed to the void. "But I'm going to find him. In this life, or the next."

A long silence ensued in which Sasuke's anger seemed to hover in the space between.

"What happened?" She eventually asked.

He didn't want to answer. It was his problem, only solvable by himself. It wasn't anyone else's business but his own. Everyone else would just get in the way and end up dead. But then, he wasn't probably going to leave this room anyway.

So he told her.

The next two hours were spent as Sasuke recited the story of how his brother had pretended to love him, up until the day he slaughtered the entire clan. He explained how his brother had left him alive so that he, Sasuke, would be able to grow and provide one final challenge for his brother's might. That in his brother's eyes, he was nothing more than an experiment to see which of the two was stronger: his hate, or Itachi's apathy.

After he finished his story there was another silence, a deeper one that somehow seemed less empty than the ones before it.

"I see." Sakura said softly.

Sasuke doubted that she did. She couldn't understand what it was like to have her family suddenly ripped from her by someone that she thought she knew. But he didn't contest her statement. It wasn't worth the energy, and strangely it felt good for someone to know, right before the end.

"I wonder if Naruto was assigned new teammates once we vanished. He's so annoying, but I'd rather be with him and as a team instead of here." Anything would be better than here went unspoken. "I wonder what it'd have been like."

"No point wondering." Sasuke grunted. "Just save your strength. He should be returning soon."

Six one forty-nine. Six one forty-eight.

****Line Break****

He screamed in impotent rage as once again Iruka's knees buckled, blood flowing from the corner of his mouth as his eyes lost focus. Naruto ran over as the man began to topple, tried to catch the first human being to acknowledge his existence, only for his mentor to pass through his hands.

He knew he couldn't touch him, hadn't been able to touch him, for who

knew how many iterations of this same event he'd been through. Each time, no matter what he did, the results were invariably the same.

Iruka died.

There were footsteps behind him. Naruto didn't bother to turn around. His attention was whole consumed by the corpse on the ground. He didn't even respond when he felt hot breath on his neck, Mizuki's voice in his ear.

"You are the Kyuubi. And you are to blame for this man's death."

The world froze, falling leaves suspended in animation before everything fuzzed like a bad recording and was yanked out from beneath him.

Naruto blinked, reorienting to the world around him. He was standing by a rundown shed in a painfully familiar forest. Laid out before him on the ground was the forbidden scroll, open to the Kage bunshin instructions.

Naruto snarled in anger, hands contorting into fists before he lunged forward and ruthlessly stomped his foot on the scroll, making sure to grind his heel in so that it ripped.

Dimly, he could hear Iruka's voice behind him. Naruto ignored the voice, sinking to his knees much like his former teacher had done moments before; only he hadn't been fatally wounded.

Curling into a ball, he tuned out the insistent yelling and resisted the attempt to yank him to his feet. It wouldn't last long.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, there was a shout of surprise. Naruto heard the sound of clanging metal, Iruka's screams for him to snap out of it and run, followed quickly by a thumping noise and strangled gurgle, then silence.

"You are to blame, yet again, demon child."

This time, he couldn't tell if the accusation was voiced by Mizuki, Iruka, or made in his own voice, his own thoughts made manifest and used against him.

It would all start again. There wasn't anything he could do to stop it. He had tried, run through a thousand different paths, a million different scenarios.

Now, he just wanted to curl up and sleep until it all went away.

****Line Break****

Kakashi sat reclined at one of the outside tables outside a favorite dive of his, a half-finished cold beer in his hand. The sun was approaching the four o'clock position and he was now left to wait until the fruits of his labor paid off. He had stacked the cards, set them to topple. Now he just had to wait for a gust of wind to finish the job.

He inhaled deeply and blew it out through his nose, tilting his head back so that he was gazing at the multi-colored tarpaulin that provided his circular table some modicum of shade. After all of this work, he was going to need a vacation. He'd been pulling twenty hour unpaid shifts for over a week now. It was exhausting work, physically and mentally tormenting teens; it really took it out of a guy.

His brief state of apparent inattention was taken advantage of as he sensed the presence of someone slip into the seat across from him uninvited.

"To what do I owe this dubious pleasure, Anko?" He asked, dropping his head back down so that he gazed at the female special jounin with a blank expression. Blank expressions were easy to deliver when all most people were able to see of your face is a sliver of skin and a single eye.

Anko was beautiful. She was beautiful in the way that knives and swords were beautiful; that is she was a pleasure to look at, but you didn't want to become too acquainted with for fear that the relationship would end terminally.

She sat across from him with her legs crossed, and in one of her hands she waved a stick with an orange-red ball skewered through the center. She had black hair that seemed to gleam a dark blue in the sun, all done up in a short, spiky fanned-ponytail barely restrained by a Konoha headband wrapped around her forehead.

She was looking at him with a playfully amused expression on her round face. She was lithe, but not entirely short. She wore a tan overcoat with a purple in-seam, which had a pocket on both sides, the contents of which was anyone's guess. The wire mesh bodysuit stretched from her neck down to her thighs, tucked under a dark orange mini-skirt.

Anko grinned, a predatory expression that held a few too many teeth for most people's comfort. It reminded you of something you could only hear the faint rattle of, waiting in the tall grass for something young, tender, and juicy to wander past.

"You look like you've seen hell recently." Anko observed, taking a bite of her snack, a kind of sugar covered doughnut that had been deep-fried. He didn't question where she got it. That way madness lay. Her voice was low, almost husky, containing in it a slight rasp just on the edge of hearing.

I'm putting kids who aren't even genin yet through a test that break aspiring ANBU like a kit-kat bar. Is what he didn't say to the woman, because that wasn't the kind of thing you said in public. "Long hours." He compromised, taking a pull from his drink.

Anko tapped a slender finger on the table, trying to draw his attention downwards. An act that would force his eye to slide across her chest and what little was left to the imagination. Kakashi recognized it for what it was: a game. There were rumors; of course, there were always rumors - even about him, if you'd believe it. People claimed to have enjoyed a night with the snake whore of Orochimaru's, but Kakashi had met the woman a few times and saw underneath the façade she put up.

She smiled, she showed, she played into everyone's expectations, and they thought themselves clever at having caught the eye of such a pretty woman and they took her out with certain ideas for the evening in mind. They bought dinner, paid for a few traveling stores, got to their homes. That was where she'd kiss them on the cheek, thank them for the great time, and make no promises about seeing them again.

Embarrassed, her marks would go inside and vow never to breathe a word on how they were played. They'd even make up more rumors, about how she was untamable in bed, but through some effort they had managed it. Anko was delighted whenever this happened. More rumors that she didn't have to make up, no effort spent.

Kakashi looked. After all, a free show was a free show. Her nails were painted a faint purple.

"Long hours in detention cell seven?" She asked.

"Hmmm," Kakashi hummed, looking up and meeting her brown eyes. "Not entirely sure what you're talking about. I've been busy testing the team Lord Hokage is trying to pawn off on me."

"And that involves block sevenâ€¦ how?" She asked, though her smile told him she already knew. She was third in command in the T&I department, working under Ibiki and inspector Yamanaka. She would have access to the entire compound as well as rights to see all documentation.

Kakashi shrugged. "Like I said, team seven."

"I had a little looksy into what you're doing." Said Anko, waving her dango stick around. "Some would say you're being rather cruel, especially to the blond kid. At least with the other two, they have each other."

Anko finished her Dango and sucked on the wooden spike in a way that made the rest of the men in the bar break out in a cold sweat.

Kakashi took another pull on his beer, gazing placidly at the special interrogator. He realized that there would come a time that he would have to pay for everything that'd he'd done throughout his long career. He, just as any jounin, had sins to account for when the time came. But it wouldn't be today. Today, he would feed the rain and walk away.

He put down his finished beer and stood. Turning his back on Anko, he stepped out from underneath the shade cast by the canopy and into the burning sun of Konoha's midafternoon heat.

Stretching his left arm over his head and pulling on the elbow with his right, he grinned under his mask in anticipation. A few more days; then, he'd be free to perform missions as he saw fit once again.

He really was as happy as he pleased, inclined to dream of freer days.

****End of Chapter Two****

****A/N:** Anko was tricky. I wanted to keep true to her characterization in cannon, however it is difficult to write her and not portray her like a penny-whore, as she is in a lot of fics. No, she needed a purpose behind it. So, I made it a game to her. Let me know what you think.**

4. Chapter 3

****A/N:** Still my author's note. Have you got yours yet?**

****Chapter Three****

****A Passing Grade****

There are four steps to casting jutsu: Formation, Investiture, Signature, and Incantation. While Signature and Incantation can be bypassed at a cost, without Formation and Investiture, the results will always be negative. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

****Line Break****

Naruto lay in the corner of infinity, curled into a tight ball, eyes closed against the white void. He breathed in, exhaling desire.

The nightmare had shifted. He had come back to reality briefly, in time to see Kakashi's smug ass face. The man had made a gesture and then the once mottled gray room had bled of color, transforming into a never ending and pure landscape. There was no visual trace of where the walls had been but a few years ago " or had it only been a few days? No, years" Time had lost all meaning.

He had tried staring at his blood and sweat stained pants, keeping the bleeding white in his periphery until the consuming color bled into him as well. After that, he'd closed his eyes and retreated into the darkness his lids afforded him.

Now he just lay in silence, wishing it was less violent. There was no longer any distraction to mask what was real. He was the Kyuubi's Jinchuuriki. That fact had been pounded into him for who knew how long. He could still hear Mizuki whispering to him, an echo etched into the back of his skull.

Left alone with his thoughts, he found his mind slipping " fading. He wanted to fight, but he couldn't contest Kakashi's words. He couldn't pretend away his problems. He had drawn on the power, even when he hadn't a clue how.

It had been intoxicating beyond belief. Even as Kakashi was tossing him around, he felt that he was just on the cusp of victory, if only he had pushed just a little bit harder.

He was human, of that he was unequivocally sure. He also had a demon in him, as recent evidence confirmed. Through the haze his thoughts were becoming, he suffered from a rare burst of introspection. In that moment, he realized that made him different, and for a moment, he understood the harsh looks he'd received throughout his life. Like a rabid dog, you pitied it, and at the same time kept it far away

from you and those you loved as possible. Ignorance bred fear, and rumors fueled a fire of mistrust, kept alive by laws of silence he hadn't been aware of.

White was slowly creeping in from the side of his vision, piercing through the protection closed eyes once offered.

Sensory deprivation and Mizuki's taunting words were slowly driving him insane. The inability to truly hear anything besides his own incessant heartbeat â€" somehow Hatake had drained any sound he tried to make from the room.

A sudden smile sprang to life on his lips and his eyes flew open. Thrusting his hand up, he gazed at it until the white drained it of color and it vanished too. He laughed wildly, though he couldn't hear the sound.

It was time for one last bow - a resolution with himself. Moody Naruto's time was over. It was time for a new Naruto to take the stage.

It was just that easy, all the baggage he'd been carrying vanished, like breath on a mirror.

****Line Break****

Resolution came upon him, in purple. Before now, he hadn't been aware emotion could be a color, but there it was. Setting his teeth, Sasuke steeled himself. He was still hanging with his arms bound behind him. Knowledge as clear as crystal had set in his mind, and time was running out. His count had reset several times, when their interrogator had brought them food that bolstered his strength.

The man hadn't lowered them, instead forcing them to suffer from the indignity of being force-fed.

It was time.

"Sakura, I'm going to need your help." He said.

Behind him, he could hear her lift her head in silent acknowledgement. She was the weak link in his plan. She wasn't as strong as he was. Quite frankly, he wasn't entirely sure how she had lasted this long to begin with. But at this point he had no other choice. If she failed, then he wasn't going to live long enough to regret it. Either way, rescue seemed unlikely.

"I'm going to lift you up. When I do, get yourself free and get me down if you can."

"How are you going to-"

Sasuke didn't give her the chance to finish. Every second was just another opportunity for him to talk himself out of the idea.

Slamming what little available chakra he had into his arms and shoulders, he thrust his back up, rocking his body towards the ceiling. The force of his movement sent him into a pendulum like movement as he came crashing back down. Pain erupted in his

shoulders, but he grit his teeth and timed his next move.

As he hit the arc of his swing, he thrust himself up once again. This time when he came down the added momentum was too much and his arms popped from their sockets making a sound a bit like a cup surfacing from a pond. Now he was hanging by muscle and twisted skin. He only had seconds before his own weight would rip his arms from his shoulders.

He thrust himself up again, this time from the hips, praying he hadn't miscalculated. His legs made contact with something long and thin. He wrapped them around Sakura's rope and pulled himself in, angling his body so that a leg stuck out. By doing so, he formed a sort of bridge with his body that Sakura could lift herself up by and use for leverage to undo her own restraints. The problem with this was that he had to turn in such a way that he was now laying on the twisted flesh of his dislocated arm pressing against his windpipe. He was, in essence, hanging himself.

He felt Sakura bobbing, twisting and writhing on his leg, pulling at her restraints, even as the darkness crept in on his vision. Just as his legs were beginning to go limp with ingratitude at his lack of providing a sufficient amount of oxygen, he felt Sakura's weight vanish as she fell towards the floor.

His body went slack and he gasped in great lungfuls of air, the pain in his shoulders temporarily forgotten.

It took only a few moments of fumbling in the dark for Sakura to find, lift, and untie him. Only now that they were both standing - albeit a bit shakily - on the ground, Sasuke allow himself a brief smile of victory. His sense of elation was quickly shattered, when his right arm was rudely and brusklly taken and swiveled around. He'd barely had enough time to turn to look at his fellow cellmate before she had quite literally punched his arm back into place.

In the weeks to follow, Sasuke would never admit the scream that accompanied his arm reunion with it's joint was anything but manly.

"Keep quiet." Sakura hissed.

This, Sasuke felt, was a horrendously unfair statement to make. He'd been the one keeping quiet for almost two weeks now, all the while having to suffer through her wailing for half of it.

"Stay still, I'm going to do your other one."

Sasuke whimpered. This did nothing to forestall the blinding pain at the hands of this new tormentor.

Once he'd regained his composure, he set about testing his arms. They were weak and the shoulders were already swelling. He doubted he could do anything with them if it came to fighting his way out of here. He was going to have to rely on Sakura for that. The prospect didn't excite him.

"We need to get moving." He said in as quiet a voice as he could manage.

It was an awkward few minutes as they attempted to locate the door. In that time, Sasuke had been formulating plans on how to break it down, such as using the rope to leverage the knob and snap the lock.

There was a click, a surprised intake a breath, and light flooded the room. Sasuke had to raise a hand to shield his eyes against the sudden illumination. He'd been in the dark for so long, the weak recessed light in the hall seemed like a bonfire.

"The door was unlocked," Sakura said, surprised. "Why didn't he lock it?"

Sasuke could venture an answer. It would be perfectly reasonable considering what he'd seen of the man to be taunting them with the prospect of freedom. Right before they were free, when the light of the sun was glimmering overhead, he'd swoop in.

For an instant, he considered not even trying. He quickly crushed this thought, however. It was better to try and fail than admit defeat at the starting line.

"Guess he finally slipped up." Sasuke said, pressing forward and crouched down on the other side of the doorframe across from where Sakura was hunkered down and peering out through the crack in the door.

In the light, Sasuke could see that Sakura's once annoyingly immaculate hair was now a nest of snarls matted down by dried blood. Her face was painted a dull gray with dirt. Her clothes hung in tatters from her frame like creeping vines.

"It could be a trap." She whispered.

Sasuke grunted. He reached forward and pushed the all the way open to expose the long hallway lined with empty shelves and half open doors. He couldn't see anyone, but that didn't mean that they weren't there.

Tentatively, Sasuke began to move forward. Sakura surprised him when she took up a defensive position behind and slightly to the right of him. They progressed down the hallway and were almost to the far door when Sakura suddenly pulled up short, stopping to stare at a closed door. There was a strange symbol of twisting lines written on the door in black ink.

Sasuke slowed to a stop. "What's going on?" He whispered.

"It's strange, isn't it? I mean— now that I think about it, why only the two of us?" Sakura's brows furrowed as she stepped forward and pressed her hand flat against the door over the symbol. It flashed briefly and there was a click. With a push, it swung open.

"What are you talking about?" Sasuke asked, eyeing where the symbol.

"Come and help me." Sakura called from where she had stepped into the room.

With a grunt of annoyance, Sasuke backtracked to the door and stepped inside. The square concrete room was completely gray. The uniform color was broken only by him, Sakura, and "€"

"Is that Naruto?"

Sakura was kneeling by where a blond-haired boy in tattered clothes that may have once been orange was sitting slumped beneath a crater smashed in the wall. She had one hand pressed against his chest and had lifted his head with the other to inspect his face. His eyes were closed and didn't seem to be responding to her touch.

"He isn't dead." She said.

"Slap him awake." Sasuke suggested.

"I'm not sure it'll work," Sakura said slowly. "I think he's in a genjutsu. We need to disrupt his chakra."

Sasuke clicked his teeth in annoyance. He knew that they couldn't leave Naruto here, but carrying him would slow them down. So he followed through on his own advice.

He bent down and slapped Naruto clean across the face. It was surprisingly satisfying. Something about Naruto's rounded features seemed to cry out for a hand across it.

Naruto's eyes shot open, a stark blue against the gray dust that had settled over his face, obscuring the three whisker marks on each of his cheeks.

"You awake now, dobe?" Sasuke asked tersely. He had expected anger, and heated rebuke before complying and falling to heel behind them.

Naruto grinned. "What took you so long, bastard? Getting your hair done?"

Sasuke couldn't help the short, stilted bark of laughter that escaped from him. He could practically picture his blood and sweat encrusted hair sticking up at odd angles.

"Hey Sakura? How's life going?" Naruto asked, turning his head to look Sakura who'd been watching the scene with a half bemused and half exasperated look on her face. "Have you seen Sasuke's hair? I think he got it done by a weed wacker. He really should get a refund."

"Hello, Naruto, nice to see you to." Sakura replied with a weak smile.

"Let's get going." Sasuke said, standing.

Naruto nodded and tried to stand. He got about halfway up before his knees betrayed him and fell back.

"Damn." He cursed. "How long has that Kakashi asshole left me here?"

"Who?" Sakura asked.

"White hair, one eye, looks a bit like a scarecrow that's been left out too long."

'A name for the corpse, at last.' Sasuke thought. For some reason, the name seemed had a creeping sense of familiarity, as though he'd heard it somewhere before.

"Sasuke, help me lift him." Sakura said, reaching out and grabbing Naruto by the arm.

"Nah, I'll be fine." Naruto said, waving her back.

The blond placed his hands back against the wall and slowly worked his way to a standing position. "See?" he said, grinning. "Told you."

"Brilliant," Sakura quipped. "Now walk."

The grin on Naruto's face wavered only for an instant before reattaching to his face like plaster. "Little miracles, Sakura. Little miracles."

He took a shaky step, then another. With a frown, he cracked his neck, swore something unintelligible under his breath. Then he slapped himself on the stomach with a muttered, "get on it, fuzz ball."

Sasuke frowned, quite confused. His confusion grew when Naruto's next step was much steadier, if still a bit wobbly. It was as if he'd recovered several days worth of abuse in the span of one palm to the belly.

"Alright, we're good to go." Naruto said cheerfully, running a thumb under his nose.

Sasuke nodded, pushing the problem from his mind. They had to get out of here. So what if the blond had lost his mind? Sasuke was fairly sure they'd all have a few bolts rattling loose after these past however the hell long they'd been in there. All that mattered at the moment was escaping in one piece. Naruto being able to walk was one less thing holding them back.

The three of them made their retreat from the cell, pushing out into the corridor and making for the far door. Sasuke reached for the doorknob, prepared to carefully and quietly open the door to peek in and get a handle on the situation, when Naruto twisted the handle and blew through the door with all the unstoppable ability of a bolder in full tumble.

Sasuke cringed, suddenly acutely aware of the second reason why he didn't want to bring Naruto along. Subtly and a grasp of the situation stuck to his former classmate like a gold bricks.

When Naruto came to a sudden stop on the other side of the doorway, his shoulders tensing in preparation, Sasuke knew that the jig was up. He pressed through, Sakura close behind.

The man Naruto identified as Kakashi stood in the middle of the room, his arms folded over his chest, black robe hanging like an oncoming

storm. Their tormenter's face, what little he could see of it, was taught with suppressed anger. Behind him there was a door hanging slightly ajar. It was most probably the exit.

The only thing that stood between them and freedom was a man they had no hope of defeating. Sasuke prepared himself to die.

I commend my soul to any god that can find it.

"You pass." Kakashi said, resentment filling his voice like a limp balloon.

The phrase hung in the air, drifting back and forth waiting for someone to pick it up.

"What?" Sakura asked, making the attempt.

The man sighed deeply, unfolding his arms and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You pass. Congratulations, you're all genin now. I have, unfortunately, been assigned as your jounin instructor."

Sakura's eyes wavered dangerously in her skull. "What the hell are you talking about?" She asked, a brittle edge to her voice.

"It seems rather obvious, don't you think?" The one-eyed man drawled. "But I can spell it out for you. I understand that you've been through some tough times lately." He shifted, black robes sliding like water.

"It's not obvious to me," Naruto blurted, looking as though he were on the verge of attacking. He was leaning forward, eyes narrowed, fingers twitching. It was only the memory of how things last played out and a sense of self-preservation that held him back.

For Sasuke, the pieces of the puzzle were sliding into place. And he wasn't too sure he liked the result.

Kakashi spoke first. "When a prospective genin graduates from the academy, they are assigned a jounin to instruct them and see them through until they are Chuunin. I was assigned you three."

"And that gives you the right to torture us!" Sakura fairly screeched.

"Yes." Kakashi replied simply. "I could do whatever I wanted so long as you three came to no permanent harm. Against my expectations, you have passed the test. You worked together and escaped your cell, even rescuing a fellow prisoner who couldn't help himself along the way. We are, as of now, Team Seven. Once again, congratulations." He nodded curtly.

"I don't want you as our sensei." Sakura hissed, eyes wild. "I don't want to ever see you again."

Sasuke did not miss the sudden flair of triumph in the jounin's eye.

"The choice is yours." Kakashi said flatly, tilting his head to one side. "I will be at training ground seven for the next three days. Come there when you are ready to begin your instruction."

Kakashi vanished, leaving nothing but a faint gust and the scent of green leaves.

The three of them stood there, standing awkwardly now that the object of each of their focus had left them.

Sakura broke the silence first. "Like hell I'm going anywhere near there." With that, she bolted for the door, flinging it all the way open so that it banged against the wall, and darted through it in a flurry of dirty pink hair.

"Well, this sucks." Naruto commented lightly.

Sasuke shot a look at the blond from the corner of his eye. Now that Kakashi was gone, Naruto seemed to have relaxed, standing loosely with his hands at his sides. He was staring at the door Sakura had vanished through.

Sasuke grunted in affirmation, shaking his own shoulders to try and loosen the tension that was steadily building up there. His arms felt like molten lead.

"Are you going?" Sasuke asked, as he started for the door, not really caring if he got an answer.

Naruto snorted incredulously, "You kidding?" He asked.

Sasuke nodded, not really expecting a different answer. The exchange settled he pass through the door as well, his mind set on getting home.

****Line Break****

Naruto was once again alone in the room, but not truly alone. He had never really been alone, even when there was no one around. Whatever barrier had been between him and the demon mentally had crumbled.

"What are you going to do?" Came the deep rumbling voice inside his head.

"No idea." Naruto responded flippantly out loud, walking over to one of the tables that lined the walls and inspecting the rather crude looking spike resting on it.

"He seems powerful, for a human." The demon spoke.

Naruto reached out and fingered the weapon, pricking his finger on the edge of the sharp metal. The cut vanished a few seconds later.

"You know the rules of our deal." The demon continued, "You have access to as much of my chakra as you think you can control. However -"

"Yes," Naruto cut across smoothly. "But every time I draw on your chakra it brings you that much closer to breaking free. You were quite plain on that point - and I was paying attention the first time."

"Surprising, given your history." The demon shot back.

Naruto scowled. He knew perfectly well he wasn't that smart, there was no need to rub it in. That was like rubbing salt in an open crevice, or something along those lines.

"What do you think I should do?" Naruto asked. He realized that asking the demon who attacked his homeland what he should do didn't rank highly on 'clever things to do today' meter, but he was kind of at a loss for the moment. Besides, whatever the demon suggested, he could do the opposite. No one ever saw that one coming.

"I don't care what you do." Said the demon.

Well, it was worth a try. The best laid plans of mice and shinobi and all of that.

"Use my chakra now, use my chakra later; it is all the same to me. Eventually, though, I will have my freedom. What does it matter to me what year or decade it comes in?"

Naruto hefted the spike, weighing the weapon in one hand. He could respect the demon for its opinion, if nothing else. He now knew what it was like to be caged in a cell that he couldn't escape from, with nothing more than a single color to keep him occupied. One could easily go mad that way.

He considered the demon's words for a moment. Naruto could best describe their relationship as a working animosity. The demon resting comfortably in his head hated everything equally. With untold centuries at his disposal to enact his one-sided revenge against all of creation, he was in little hurry on when and how his anger was to be carried out. There was a balance to it all, Naruto supposed.

"I don't suppose there is a third option?" He asked, hopefully.

The demon chuckled, a hollow reverberating sound that echoed in the empty places in Naruto's head - of which there were more than he was entirely comfortable with. "None that I can see," It said. "And I've had a very long time to think about it."

"Ah, well," Naruto said, dropping the spike back on the table with a clang. "It was worth asking. Now, I think its time for some breakfast. I'm starved."

****Line Break****

Kakashi stood leaning against one of the several posts planted in the clearing of training ground seven. His eyes were moving across the pages of his porn, but he wasn't comprehending a word on it; his mind was elsewhere.

He was now responsible for three children that he hadn't a clue how to deal with. For most of his life, he had trained soldiers, men and women already nearing the peak of their combat prowess. People whose instincts for battle was only rivaled by their desire to see Konoha survive their lifetime, however short that may be. His job had been to give them that hard push that brought out their full potential.

He would have to read a book on how to raise teenagers; he'd be damned before asking any of his new fellow sensei for tips.

Sighing forlornly, Kakashi tucked his porno back into his vest pocket. He was getting ahead of himself. None of them had shown up yet. And he didn't really expect any of them to show up in the first day, but one of the two males would certainly be here by the second.

His freedom rested on how much lasting fear he managed to instill in Sakura, the pink haired midget. He rather liked his chances with that one. He had managed to shatter her worldview while simultaneously destroying her resolve. A voice in the back of his head warned that maybe he had gone too far. He crushed that niggling doubt with pragmatism. The Hokage had known what he was doing assigning him this team and letting him go as far as he did. The worst that would happen is that he'd have to pay for her counseling and maybe make a few remunerations to the family.

He glanced at his watch only to scold himself. A few hours into waiting and he was already impatient. Waiting on stakeouts was one thing; in that there was purpose, stalking the prey waiting for a mistake. But this? It itched at his very soul. There was nothing to do but wait for the pieces to fall where they may.

He found his mind drifting back to the children. Really, they'd have to be crazy to come here. He'd tortured them for nearly a month, passing through almost every non-permanent event he could think of, each tailored to chisel away at their weak points.

Sasuke had his pride, his belief that he was superior to everything that passed into his line of sight. And so Kakashi had belittled him, showing the Uchiha time and again how weak he really was. He'd drop the boy from the ceiling, hand him a weapon, and then beat him into the ground. He'd give the boy some hope, always letting him think he was about to get lucky and strike and escape, only to easily dance around his attack and disarm him.

Kakashi had it on good authority that hope was the greatest of all gifts.

With Sakura, he had to take a different approach. Her false veneer of self-confidence that was reported in the academy was easy enough to see through. She doubted herself, but pretended that she didn't, lying convincingly enough that she'd even convinced herself. All Kakashi had to do was strip away her lies and present their corpses to her.

The task was simple enough: shake the beliefs she'd built up about the world, force her into situations that contradicted those beliefs, and sprinkle in a bit of genjutsu to give her the final push. He'd be ashamed of himself if he weren't proud about how clever a job it had been.

Naruto had been a bit trickier. The boy was already a self-confidence fiasco and mental neurosis that Kakashi gave him a few years on the outside before he broke all on his own. That, coupled with the demon shoved into the boy's psyche made the boy a landmine for what he wanted to do. He needed to push, but not push too much.

Genjutsu had been the obvious answer. Reports claimed that the boy had no aptitude for the subject. Pulling a line from one of the instructors, "If Naruto even realizes that he is placed under the simplest of illusions, I'll quit my job." While Kakashi usually gave as much credit to academy instructors as he gave the dirt on the bottom of his shoes, the bravado alone merited note.

Kakashi leaned back and closed his eyes, breaking from his musing as boredom overtook him. Speculations were useless. He done the best he could with the limitations given. All he could do was wait.

****Line Break****

With ramen gurgling pleasantly in his stomach, Naruto wandered out from the foliage of trees and into the clearing of training ground seven. Against the leftmost of the three posts in the center of the clearing, there leaned his new sensei. He wasn't wearing the robes anymore. Instead he was dressed in a green flak jacket over a black shirt. His black pants were held up by a cord of ninja wire wrapped several times around his waist, white bandages held the flare of the pants to his ankles. He was holding an orange covered book in one hand, his eyes scanning the pages. In his other hand he spun a kunai on one finger by the loop in the metal. By the jounin's feet, there was a brown, wrapped package.

Naruto had to resist the urge to draw a kunai from his pouch and throw it, just in the extremely off chance it worked.

"I must say that I didn't expect anyone to show up, much less on the same day and wearing the same clothes that they were released in."

Naruto forced a grin, looping his hands behind his head. "Ah, that's what you get for holding a guy for three weeks in prison. It makes it very difficult to pay rent."

"And yet you could afford ramen?" Kakashi asked, raising an eyebrow, though his eyes never left his book.

"How could you tell?" Naruto sniffed.

"You reek of it, even over the smell of imprisonment."

Naruto chuckled, this time it came more naturally. "Ah, you've got a good nose too, Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi hummed in agreement. Looking up over the top of his book he said, "you might as well make yourself comfortable. The clock is still ticking and if the other two don't show up in the next three days, you all fail by default."

"That's pretty dirty. Sakura looked pretty messed up. I'm gonna go talk to her." Naruto said, turning around and heading for the tree line again.

"No, you won't." Kakashi said, spearing him to the spot with his words. "You will remain in this training ground until the team either passes or fails."

Naruto turned to glare at the jounin. "What am I going to do for food?" He demanded.

Kakashi returned his gaze to his book, but pushed the brown package forward slightly. "You can hunt so long as you don't leave the clearing. There are vegetables and spices in there. As for water?" The jounin shrugged. "Figure it out."

Naruto eyed the package suspiciously. Vegetables were a mystery on par with his understanding of space. There had always been something faintly menacing about them. Turnips, for example: anything that you had to boil for eight hours and then bang off the concrete just to soften them up just didn't want to be food. And broccoli always seemed to be judging him with their green, implacable stalks.

"Three days?" He asked, hoping that a large amount of time had somehow slipped by him.

"Two days, twenty-one hours and sixteen minutes."

****Line Break****

The Uchiha estate was a haunted hall of memories and half-covered bloodstains. Which was one of the many reasons Sasuke didn't live there. Instead, he opted to live in a two-room apartment on the other side of the village, so that even if the intervening village between them toppled down in a single afternoon, there wouldn't be much chance of him being able to lay eyes on his ancestral home.

Though the Uchiha's property tax alone cost him enough to bankrupt a minor noble house each year, he maintained ownership of the land for the express purpose that one day, when Itachi was six feet under, he could lay the place to rest himself. Baptized by fire, if you will.

He had changed into a fresh blue shirt and white shorts after a shower that may or may not have lasted the better part of a day. The dirt, blood, and grime of the cellblock had been as stubborn as the fan girls that paraded behind him at the academy. He sat in what served as his kitchenette, his elbows resting on the table, hands supporting his chin contemplating his next move as the kettle simmered just behind him on the stove.

The issue he was currently wrestling with was that he no longer had a direction to charge at. His brother was the ultimate goal, but that was at the end of a long passageway of accomplishments that no longer had doors. He had finished the academy, that door was shut firmly behind him and there was no desire to go back. That only left forward, into an abyss of uncertainty.

His eyes roamed the plaster wall as though defying it to give him the answers he sought. He could petition for another sensei, as the last Uchiha he could probably get away with it. But that would be after a virtual sea of red tape and struggle. He had never met the Hokage, but there were enough rumors that ascertain that he did not go back on his decisions lightly.

That meant training on his own or accepting Kakashi as his mentor. Kakashi, the man who'd shown his temperament to be along the lines of his brother's, with enough apparent skill shown to maybe be in the

same league as his brother. In Sasuke's twisted world, that was enough cause for consideration.

Kakashi was a parallel to his brother. They were both apparently cold, efficient, and undoubtedly powerful. Sasuke desired strength, and before a few weeks ago he'd have been willing to pay any price to achieve it. But in struggling against the pain inside the cell, and watching Sakura slowly unravel under pressure, he'd realized something: Power twisted you.

Already he didn't sleep well at night, and Kakashi's accusation that he was already his brother had lingered with him. So, there was an experiment he could conduct. Could he retain a shred of humanity and still defeat his brother?

He had seen things that no genin his age could understand, and was already warped beyond recognition for a twelve year old. So, he shouldn't have found it strange when he discovered himself striding towards the door.

He passed outside and into Konoha's midafternoon heat. A brisk series of leaps across the roofs of Konoha's buildings brought him to one of the sections cordoned off from the public and designated for shinobi training grounds.

Training ground seven was at the top of a large hill covered in trees. He pressed through the dense forestry and entered a clearing, almost tripping over where Naruto was lounging by a tree. The blond was playing with a leaf in his hands, tossing it back and forth, following its flight with his eyes.

"So, that makes two."

The familiar voice of his past tormentor came from a canopy of leaves just above him. Looking up, he spied Kakashi hanging upside down from a branch looking down at him with a level gaze. "And what has the great Uchiha come here for, hmm?"

Sasuke walked over to the center of the clearing where there were three posts about a meter and a half tall speared into the ground. With a light leap, he seated himself on the center one.

"I'm here for revenge, on you and my brother." Sasuke said in a voice devoid of passion. "But I'm also here to see if I can avoid becoming like him. That start is here. I will use you up until I kill you."

****Line Break****

The air was roasting. It could have been anything else; this was a shinobi village after all. It could have been raining acid and Sakura suspected that the citizens of Konoha would still have gone about their shopping. There was something unstoppable about the commerce of teenage girls that defied reason.

Only this time it felt hollow for her.

A hand wrapped around hers and tugged her forward, through the bustling crowd.

"Come on, Sakura! You're being slow." Ino shouted over her shoulder.

Sakura did her best to follow the streak of blond hair and purple clothes that darted through the crowd with a desperate intensity. The only thing that connected them was Ino's grip on Sakura's hand.

"What's gotten into you? First you disappear for almost three weeks and now you're acting like you've had your soul sucked out. It can't be that bad, being on a team with Naruto. After all, you've got Sasuke on your team."

Sakura didn't know how to respond. Ino assumed that because Sasuke was placed on a team with her, it was guaranteed success. But she didn't know. She couldn't know how Sasuke had failed; in every respect he had failed. He wasn't unbeatable. He wasn't all knowing. He hadn't been able to stop the pain.

Would Ino even believe her if she told her what happened? Probably not. She most certainly wouldn't have if she had been in her shoes.

The shop she was dragged into smelled intensely of linen and new leather. Immediately her grip on Ino's hand tightened, fear and bile rising at the back of her throat. Memories of that hated place came swarming back to her like locusts. She could almost feel the whip on her back and in her hand, hear Kakashi's voice telling her to use it on Sasuke.

She blinked and the illusion was shattered. Brightly colored cloths hung from racks and wrist bangles hung from hooks stuck in shelves. Behind the counter there was a woman with green hair done up in a bun and a smile so broad it appeared plastered there permanently.

The scared rule had been broken. She had made eye contact; there was no longer any hope of escape.

"Can I help you find anything?" The saleslady asked, her voice as sickly sweet as the perfume she wore.

"No, but thanks for asking." Ino replied cheerfully as she skipped over to a shelf that held an assortment of multicolored stones.

"I'm sure I can help you find something." The saleslady pressed with all the relentless fake enthusiasm only people paid just above minimum wage could muster.

Sakura, left standing in the doorway, found her eyes lingering on the little hooks that the leather bracelets hung from. If she were careful and had enough of them, she could probably suspend the saleslady by the skin of her back.

She shook her head, horrified by her own thoughts. With a mental kick, she forced herself forward, picking up a bracelet and staring at it with a desperate intensity. She had escaped that place. Those kinds of thoughts had no place in proper society.

Her self-recriminations were shattered when somebody bumped into her from behind. She started, and before she could stop herself, she'd

grabbed one of the brushes in the deal bin at the end of the isle by the head and spun around, prepared to use the haft of the impromptu weapon that tapered out to a point.

"Whoa!" The boy civilian boy exclaimed, throwing up his hands in the air in a sign of surrender. He had a face that seemed straight out of boy band magazine, all chiseled lines and a narrow brow. His brown hair was swept back with his bangs swept up like an oncoming wave. "Sorry about that, miss." His eyes appeared honest enough, but so had Kakashi's, even as he ran currents of electricity through her body.

Sakura's eyes narrowed in suspicion. What was he doing in a shop clearly aimed at girls? Was he looking for his next target? She wouldn't let him. She'd gouge his eyes out right now.

She was about to act out on her thoughts when she spotted the small wrapped gift in his right hand, pressed between thumb and index finger. From the package a tag dangled with a small inscription that read: To my dear girlfriend, with love, Chazz.

This man was good. His excuse for being in there was almost plausible. A girlfriend? He was what, seventeen? The chances of him getting a girlfriend were astronomical. He was so young. The fact that she was only thirteen herself never entered into her equations.

"Sakura?" Ino's confused voice drew her attention.

Ino was standing a few feet away, a stuffed plushy in her arms, regarding her with a quizzical expression over the bear's head. "What's going on?"

Sakura's eyes lowered to where the point of her weapon was poised over the space between the boy's fourth and fifth rib, her left arm pinning the boy against the shelves with a chakra fueled strength that no civilian could match. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the boy's pale, terror stricken features.

Slowly, she lowered the make-shift weapon, never taking her eyes off of her perfectly steady hand as she did so. She realized suddenly, with painstaking clarity, that the boy's fear was nowhere near the level of her own. She had been terrified that the boy was going to hurt somebody - or worse, herself.

She released the boy, who backpedaled wildly, almost dropping his gift in the effort to escape. Like an Inuzuka pup running from his first bath, the boy catapulted from the shop as though his life depended on it. Which, Sakura supposed, in this case it almost had.

Ino moved up to stand behind her. "You okay?" She asked, offering the plush toy for Sakura to hold.

Sakura didn't respond at first. She only stared at the impromptu weapon in her hand. The realization that she was dangerous to those around her had settled over her shoulders like an ill-fitting coat.

She was against herself on this one. Her own mind and memories had

become the enemy. She could feel the fear coming from her bones, sinking into her muscles and brain, a black taint.

"I'm fine, Ino. Don't worry." The words bled from her mouth like quicksilver.

"You didn't seem right. Did you know him?" Ino pressed.

Sakura tossed the brush back into the bin and turned around, shoving her hands into her pockets lest they get her into trouble again. "Yeah, he was a bully." She lied. The lie left her feeling dirty. She shouldn't have to lie to her friend. It wasn't what nice people did.

"Oh," Said Ino, limply, though it was written all over her face that she didn't buy it for a second. "Well that's okay, then. He deserved it."

"How's your team?" Sakura asked, deflecting the subject, as she pressed deeper into the shop, passing shelves packed with spinning hoops and bangles.

"Too many boys," Ino groaned. "Shikamaru's a lazy ass and sensei's almost as bad. Choji would be all right if he stopped eating. Oh," Ino exclaimed, brightening up. "I meant to ask, did your sensei give you some stupid test when he came and got you?"

Sakura almost tripped. It seemed that no matter where she turned, she couldn't escape that cell. It drew her back like a moth to the flame.

"Yeah," She said, stuttering slightly.

"Was it as boring as ours? All sensei did was ask us a couple of questions, spar with each of us, and then told us we passed. I didn't even know we were taking a test for heaven sake!"

Sakura snorted. Boring? Her test? More like hellish, with an extra helping of pain on the side. It had left her on the verge of a panic whenever something so much as jumped at her.

"I take that as a no? What did you guys do?" Ino asked.

"We were locked in a room for a while until we worked together to get out." She wasn't lying this time, not really.

"That sounds like a lot more fun than what we did. At least you got to spend some time with Sasuke." Ino bubbled. "It's so not fair that you got on a team with him and I got lazy Shikamaru and boring Choji."

Sakura wasn't quite sure how she could intimate to her old friend just how much she wished their roles could have been similar. What would it have been like to take a test that hadn't pushed her past the brink of sanity, where she was ready to skewer a boy just for being clumsy.

She couldn't get free. Her heart was overruling her mind. There were other options, if she took the time to look, there had to be. But it was there, in the back of her mind, a coiled serpent waiting to

strike when next triggered. She needed to get a handle on it before she hurt someone, perhaps Ino.

Ino was a fellow shinobi and so was perfectly capable of defending herself if the need arose, but she shouldn't have to be on guard from her allies just because they were afraid and couldn't handle their fear. Sakura knew now, more than ever, what it was to be a shinobi. Kakashi had shown her just what was expected in the shinobi world. With that knowledge came a resolution.

She would never be afraid again.

A few hours later, once she'd disentangled herself from her friend and the endless horizon of shopping, she was making her way up the hill to training ground seven. There, she found Naruto reclining against a tree, his eyes closed and a leaf dangling from his lips. Sasuke was sitting on one of the three posts in the middle of the clearing. He was holding what looked like a small puzzle-box in his hands.

Then there was Kakashi. He had appeared like a wraith from the wind to hang on her left shoulder. He was eyeing her with something akin to interest with his one visible eye. He obviously expected her to flee at being caught off guard and appearing in such close proximity.

She steeled herself against the expected panic, only to find it hadn't come. There was pain; her heart was slammed in her chest like an over-excited drum. But there was pleasure too. She wasn't quivering, and she was able to meet his gaze without flinching or hesitation.

She was a shinobi, and fear was their occupation.

****End of Chapter****

****Omake****

It was eleven o'clock. Team Seven had been officially formed for nine hours and Kakashi and Anko had been drinking solidly for three of them. They sat opposite of each other in the T&I division headquarters lounge.

Kakashi had dropped by for nostalgia's sake. After all, this was the place he'd been last been free. It did the soul good to bask in the memories.

Occasionally, a dark and serious shinobi dressed in flowing black robes and smelling of disinfectant would come by, spot him, and walk up to question why he was here when he had no business to be. Kakashi would nod and smile, respond with a drunken wave, blather an excuse, and meet the shinobi's eyes with his one. The ninja would then go away. And they'd never come back.

Just because you were drunk didn't mean you have to be sloppy with genjutsu.

The table between the two of them was covered with bottles.

"The idea of the hokage â€" of the hokage - was invented by the

enemy. Bettcha didn't know that, did ja?" Kakashi slurred, waving his mostly empty bottle of Sake wildly.

"The first hokage?" Said Anko.

"No, no, the other one," Kakashi said, shaking a finger.

"Oh, that one," Anko responded cheerily, trying to remember what a Hokage was.

Kakashi's brow furrowed, "The point is â€" the point you â€" the point I'm trying to make is," he tried to focus on one of the three Ankos, "is that they're bloody stupid." He finished quickly.

"Bloody stupid," Anko agreed, staring into her drink moodily. She'd experienced an emotional swing recently and need more alcohol to cheer her up.

Kakashi thumped his bottle on the table. "S'not fair. I mean; they sit way up high in their little tower doing treework when they can break mountains with just their teeth and not a drop of sweat. What's the point of that, huh? They coulda be out there doing stuff and all."

"Mmm," Anko hummed, eyeing Kakashi's partially empty drink with a blurry if surprisingly discerning eye.

"Hokage's strong enough to make an ocean and they just sit there, giving orders when they could be teaching brains."

"Whole damn village full of brains, take it from me." Anko volunteered.

"Exactly," Said Kakashi, triumphantly. "Great big brains, little towers, no one giving a damn. And now I've got to get a few of my own."

"Brains?" Anko asked, giving him the long, steady look that usually came from when she'd had a building dropped in front of the metaphorical train of thought.

"Hokages." Kakashi corrected her. He glanced down at his empty hands and wondered where his banana went.

"Makes sense to me," Anko burred, trying to fill her empty glass and missed. She eventually managed it on the third go.

"M'banana's gone," Kakashi mumbled sadly before rallying himself. He set his hands on the table, partially to give his words emphasis, but mostly to steady himself. "It's all about how you get there in the end. When you've got there, there's no going back."

"Could use a space ship." Anko suggested.

Kakashi gave this the due consideration it deserved. "Wouldn't work, stupid brains are too small to fit." He said, after a lengthy internal debate.

"Shame."

"But I've got to do it anyway," Kakashi insisted, "brains too small to fit in a can of soup, bananas gone, and still the treework expects me to have it all big in the end."

There was a moment of drunken silence.

"Seems like a lot of effort just to feed a gorilla." Anko commented.

"But I've got to do it!" Kakashi pressed on relentlessly.

"Look-"

"I have no choice."

"Listen-"

"The hokage has no taste! There is no good in men!"

"You can-"

A look of pain crossed Kakashi's suddenly very serious face. "I can't deal with this drunk." He announced. "I'm going to sober up."

"Me too."

They both winced as the alcohol fled their bloodstreams on tidal wave of chakra, and sat up a bit more neatly.

"I can't avoid teaching them." Kakashi said miserably, eyeing the drink resting in front of Anko speculatively. It looked very familiar for some reason. "Am I right?"

"Mostly," Anko said, downing her glass before Kakashi could reclaim it. "What if you just make them Chuunin as soon as you can? They've got the genetics."

"Don't you bring genetics into this." Kakashi said snidely. "What have they got to do with anything? I mean, one of them has got a chakra monstrosity resting somewhere in his body. His father certainly didn't have that in him. No, upbringing is everything, you take it from me."

"But what have you to lose?" Anko reasoned amiably. "Just beat some skill into them and then you're done."

Kakashi made a face that closely resembled having recently swallowed a whole factory of lemons.

"Nine months of misery." He said plaintively. "But who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky and they all get bored and quit."

****A/N: All hail the king of dunces. Everyone watch out, I'm opening up my mouth.****

****I must say, Sakura has been far more interesting to write than I thought she'd be. I hope you've enjoyed her developments as much as I have.****

****On a note, I'm quite intimidated by the length this story is going to have to be.****

5. Interlude 1

****A/N: This is an author's note. Not a reader's note. Go get you own! Seriouslyâ€|.****

****Interlude****

****Gaara, Tobi, Shaft Mine****

****Gaara****

****Weapon****

The world hated and loved only itself; and so Gaara hated and loved only himself. It was a simple world philosophy, he'd been told. That wasn't to say he wasn't open to other ideas; almost any alternative would due. But thus far the world had yet to present a more accurate representation for itself. And so Gaara cared only for his continued existence.

Fear. He could almost taste it on the wind, even though he wasn't doing anything more than sitting on a park bench. Thick and pungent, it roiled around him, always keeping a predefined distance away. The citizens of his homeland - and more specifically the Kazekage's ANBU watching him - had learned. It had taken more than a few bodies, but they had eventually realized that they couldn't kill him and mother.

Gaara closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall back slightly, soaking in the sun beating down on the dessert. Crimson hair tumbled from his forehead, exposing the tattoo that read 'love' he'd carved into his own cranium on the day he had realized his personal philosophy in full. That was also the day he killed the man who raised him. Was that coincidence or irony?

Gaara shook his head, discarding the thought. It didn't matter. He simply lumped those memories in with his morals and qualms and scattered them to the winds to nest in the sand. Thoughts such as those were superfluous to a weapon like him. At thirteen, he was easily the most feared tool in the entire village.

"Gaara," and speaking of tools.

Gaara shifted slightly, cracking open an eye to see one of his father's guards standing a respectful distance away, arms folded behind his back. The Chuunin guard had a face like a shovel. Flat and smashed, the man somehow made the sand-colored robes he wore appear less intimidating than your average Konoha genin. Gaara had to admire the man's ability for that, if nothing else.

"Speak." Gaara ordered in a flat voice.

The man shivered uneasily, shifting as if trying to make himself as small as possible. A hint of amusement flickered in Gaara's chest. It was funny how people reacted to something as simple as a voice. If they associated dull tones with a dull intelligence, then they

treated that man as though he were slow witted, even if he was twice as intelligent as they were. In Gaara's case, they thought his monotone voice indicated that he was a hair's breath away from killing them.

Gaara chuckled to himself, causing the man to go white with fear. In the later case, they were right. The ground beneath his feet began to shift at his will, tendrils of sand creeping towards the Chunin's feet.

"Speak faster." Gaara suggested.

"The Kazekage has a mission for you, Lord Gaara." The Chunin stuttered out, frantically reaching into his robes and withdrawing a scroll sealed closed with the Kazekage's crest.

Gaara eyed the scroll the Chunin proffered for a moment, relishing in the man's fear. Mother screamed inside his head for the flat-faced man's blood, and he was sorely tempted to give it to her, if only to quiet her for a few precious moments.

The only thing stopping him from giving in to his mother's desires was a sense of prudence. His father's patience wasn't unending. Genin were easy enough to train and their loss wasn't crippling, and certain civilian's lives were even less valued. Slaughtering Chunin might make his father reconsider the value of his weapon of a son.

Slowly, the tendrils of sand ceased their creeping around the Chunin's ankles and extended upwards to take the scroll from the man's trembling fingers. The pale-faced Chunin flinched as the scroll left his fingers, flinching back as though he'd been punched.

"Leave." Gaara hissed.

He didn't need to tell the coward twice. The man vanished in a swirl of sand and grit.

Gaara was strong, stronger than any Jounin in the village. But even he couldn't face the entire might of a country, not yet at least.

A hoarse scream split the air, a bellow of pain and fear. Gaara didn't have to look to know that his sand, unbidden by him, had drifted off and was now slowly crushing the life from an unfortunate man who'd chosen the wrong time to take a jog.

The never-ending scream and banging of metal beating in his head quieted slightly. Gaara closed his eyes and leaned back in his bench again, a sick parody of peaceful meditation. He wouldn't sleep. He never slept, even though his body cried out for it.

If he slept, he lost even the slight amount of control that he wrested for every second of every day. A regular human, like the pitiful specimen gurgling behind him, would have caved to the demands of his body and died years ago, withered away to join the sand of the desert. But not him, he never lost. Ever. He continued on - killing and killing, time and time again without stop or respite. His existence was superior. And through his superior existence, the whetstone that was his demon sharpened the weapon.

A voice in the back of his skull wondered how long it would be before he was worn down the hilt and snapped?

****Line Break****

Kill him****. ****

The Third Kazekage was a stern looking man. Short closely cropped auburn hair counterpointed hereditary dark circles around the eyes, giving every male in his line the appearance of not having slept in years.

He sat at his desk, arms flooded over his chest, lips drawn to a fine line as he stared at Gaara with a level gaze, green eyes like chips of emeralds. . To his right, the Kazekage's bodyguard fidgeted nervously, obviously uncomfortable being in the same room their Lord and _the weapon_.

It was so loud in his head. The screaming, nails on a chalkboard, unending and relentless " mixed with the beats and scrapping of sand on glass. Mother was angry. The peasant's blood on the streets hadn't pleased her for long. There was no challenge in it.

He couldn't kill now. The Kage before him, his father, was already displeased at the murder. He had been growing more intolerant of Gaara's needs; either that or he was simply beginning to show it more. In any case, it didn't matter.

A click, the Hokage's office door behind him opened and both of his siblings entered, his jailors.

Gaara turned in time to see Temari duck a tiny bit as she moved through the doorway, making sure that the large battle fan strapped used to enhance her wind Ninjutsu didn't catch on the doorframe. She was dressed light purple-colored, off-the-shoulders garment that extended to halfway down her thighs, with a scarlet sash tied around her waist. Her teal eyes swept the room before settling on where Gaara was watching.

Behind her, Kankuro swept in riding on his sister's shadow. His thick black robes buried most of his appearance except for his face. Purple war paint was detailed in horizontal bars across his cheeks, lips and forehead, a horizontal bar extended down his chin. A bundle bound in white bandages was slung over his shoulder, held in place by a single leather strap.

They approached the Hokage, stopping beside Gaara and bowed to their father. At a wave, they rose, Kankuro taking the time to shoot an uneasy glance in Gaara's direction.

Without a word, Temari moved forward, withdrawing a scroll similar to the one the shinobi sent to retrieve him. She placed it reverently on the table before stepping back to join them once more.

The Hokage didn't spare the scroll a thought or a glance. He spoke, finally breaking the silence that had been suffocating the room for the better part of an hour.

"This mission is off the record, as such there will be no scroll or

documentation. You are to remain unseen-

Gaara tuned his father out. The Kazekage enjoyed hearing himself talk. Simple words, quick phrases without preamble. Place, mission, who needs to die. No rambling about insignificant details.

Twenty minutes later, the three of them, Gaara, Temari, and Kankuro exited the office. His keepers moved towards the dinner hall where they doubtlessly planned to eat and prepare before setting out. Gaara turned towards the palace's exit.

"Wait!"

Gaara paused, halting just as he almost left the hall. Stiffly, he turned to face where Temari had stopped and was looking at him. Her eyes were so similar to the pictures of their mother he'd seen in the Kazekage's room.

She walked up to him, leaving Kankuro standing awkwardly across the hall.

"What do you want?" Gaara demanded, meeting her gaze. She didn't flinch. She wasn't such a coward as her brother.

"You should come eat with us. It's a long journey to Iwa," She offered.

Gaara stared at her, a smile twisting at the corner of his lips, a lopsided grin not associated with true happiness. Behind her, he noticed Kankuro pale, his hands twitching towards the bundle on his back, preparing to fight.

"No," Gaara breathed. "I have orders to fulfill. I do not question my orders. We were not told to eat before leaving."

Temari hesitated, her body tense, waffling between her desire to flee his presence and some sort of familial sense of duty. Mother screamed for her blood.

"Join us, Gaara. We're family." Temari said, reaching out a hand. She stopped just short of where she knew the sand barrier, his automatic defense, would stop her.

Gaara's eyes flickered briefly at her hand before returning his gaze back to her eyes. She finally recoiled slightly, no more than a twitch of the eye and a quaver of the hand, but it was enough to betray her fear.

He gave her a tight, thin-lipped smile that showed entirely to many teeth. "Human words," He said in a strained voice, "meaningless to me."

He turned from his keepers, exiting the hallway. He had orders to fulfill.

Gaara knew that there would come a time where he would be ordered to take his own life, either out of fear or simple revenge. On that day, he would comply. Mother would taste her son's blood and he would finally be free.

****Tobi****

Tobi stood at the back of the congregation, his arms folded over his chest, watching as the silver-haired preacher extolled his insane god. Hidan, the sole remaining priest of Jashin, moved back and forth with an excited energy on his makeshift stage of wood and dirt.

Today's congregation took place just outside of Tadrin's borders. The city-state was on the outer cusp of Iwa's territory and so laws regarding religion and certain practices were difficult to enforce. The Jashinist was clever, in a mad sort of way. He worked around the thin limitations set up by the town's council and taught outside the city proper. It was a decent walk back to town, but he'd organized carts and carriages to provide transport so his congregation would be able to arrive and leave at their leisure.

Tobi's eyes followed as Hidan whipped around, waving his arms like a windmill as he spoke. When he preached, he didn't use just words. No, the priest got his entire body involved in the process, gesturing wildly, eyes rolling in his head, stomping his feet when he got to a high point of his sermon. He even got his clothes involved in his lesson. When he spun, tassels and buckles danced on the ends of metal loops sewn up and down his frame and sleeves of his red and black leather outfit. The leather clung to his body, emphasizing his emaciated and thin frame. Each ridge and contour of the bones along his ribcage was emphasized with red lines in the tooled leather.

Despite the confining clothing and the heat of the midafternoon sun, there was no sweat on the priest's brow, and his swept back silver hair didn't have a strand out of place. He moved with a practiced grace that seemed incongruous to his appearance. The man didn't show any signs of tiring despite the frantic movements he seemed to constantly be making, whirling and prancing on the stage and he preached and screamed to the sky. A feat made even more impressive by the massive tri-bladed scythe strapped across his back. It was as though the strength of the man's fervor granted the man super-human attributes.

Tobi watched, a slight sneer on his face under the swirled-pattern mask he always wore. It never ceased to amaze him how one man's teachings could breed so many different sects. Tobi wondered if the Sage of Six Paths knew what he was unleashing when he introduced chakra to the public. Probably not. Naivety towards the human race bred certain blinders to their darker sides. But then again, Tobi guessed that was just how love worked.

He couldn't pretend the same.

As the sacrament drew to a close, when people began filing out and the stragglers who stayed behind to chat with the priest were finally departing, only then did Tobi approach.

"A rousing performance," Tobi said, unfolding his arms and started to clap slowly as he drew near.

It wasn't the clap used by the average to encourage peons to applaud their masters. It had genuine enthusiasm behind it, which was, somehow worse.

Hidan turned away from whom he had been speaking with, a teenager with brown hair and budding facial hair, and the last in the waiting line. The teen threw him an annoyed look before turning away and making for the last cart to leave, being sure to bump into Tobi's shoulder as he left.

Hidan and Tobi watched the boy go before turning to face each other again, the priest's beady black eyes flicking up and down Tobi's black robed frame, taking in his relaxed posture, before resting on the mask. They regarded each other for a moment, and Tobi was surprised when he noticed that the priest took care not to actually meet his eye.

"Who are you?" Hidan asked, breaking the silence. His voice was surprisingly subdued compared to the volume he'd been raving at on stage with.

"I am nobody," Tobi answered in a light and cheerful voice. Yet underneath his rosy tones there was a darker cast, anger buried so deep that it smoldered like an ember. "But that isn't important or interesting. What is interesting is the offer I have for you. I'm putting together an organization of the powerful, influential, or uniquely skilled, you see. I've come to collect you, as you fit very nicely into all three categories."

The priest didn't seem to be listening to him, however. Hidan's eyes stared through him, looking at something Tobi couldn't see. "Where are you?" He murmured, still staring through Tobi even as he tilted his head to the side, as though listening to some unheard voice. Which, Tobi supposed, the man was.

"If I refuse?" Hidan asked, eyes twitching towards the eyehole but not quite making eye contact.

"Akatsuki is a very specialized group, as I said," Tobi explained. "I even made a motto for us. Our motto is that if you're our friend, you're our friend for life."

"And if I'm not your friend?" Hidan asked, raising a thin eyebrow.

Tobi shrugged. "That's about five seconds."

Hidan remained quiet, staring at him with recessed, and strangely unblinking eyes. The skin on the man's face was paper-thin and pale, appearing stretched over his skull like a mask.

Tobi was surprised at the contrast between the loud, energetic man Hidan presented on stage and the quiet, retrained man who stood before him. It was time for a change of tact.

"I'm surprised you haven't preformed any rituals for your supplicants." Tobi commented in an offhanded manner.

Hidan shifted, leaning away from Tobi even as his hand moved to rest lightly on the long hilt of his oversized scythe. His fingers began drumming a complicated rhythm on the red metal.

"They are not yet ready for acts of divine supplication," Said

Hidan.

"I was not aware your god was known for his patience." Tobi observed.

"Jashin rewards those who are faithful. Do not pretend to know Jashin's will, heathen." Hidan breathed, his words laced with the unspoken threat.

Tobi waved Hidan's comment off with a dismissive wave of the hand, drawing a dark look from the priest, thin, bloodless lips pressed together in suppressed anger.

"Truthfully, I have no interest in your impotent god. Our goals, however, are similar. We both desire destruction, and I can offer you a faster and more sophisticated way of achieving it."

The drumming stopped and Hidan stilled, becoming deathly silent as his dark expression became thunderous. Were Hidan a shinobi, Tobi was certain that he'd be sensing chakra rising to the surface, ready to be summoned and unleashed. As it was, there was nothing. It was a surprising advantage.

"You dare-"

Tobi cut the man off with a swipe of the hand, "Yes, I dare." He said, leaning in so that his mask was inches away from the zealot's nose. "I know your god and nothing he has to offer interests me. You, however, are a rare exception."

Hidan's eyes narrowed. "You are not here." He said, reaching out and passing a hand through Tobi's chest.

Tobi grabbed that arm, watching as Hidan's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "I'm not here. But at the same time you couldn't be more wrong."

He released the priest and walked a dozen paces away. His back to the priest, he said, "I will be here tomorrow at this time. If you wish to increase your God's congregation, the backing of my country will open doors for you."

With that, he vanished.

****Shaft Mine****

Rain fell from the sky.

Lord Tensin Hyuuga frowned in distaste, glancing up at the sunny, mid-day sky as his servants rushed forward, opening a parasol over Tensin and his honored guest. Cloudless rains weren't uncommon in the outer districts of the providence that straddled Suna and Iwa. Fortunately, there didn't appear to be much wind " the parasol would likely be enough to ward off the worst of the rainfall.

Tensin stood with his guest on a small hilltop watchtower that overlooked the fields of hundreds of people moving in and out of holes in the ground " entrances to mine shafts. They were sluggish in their efforts " but in all the time Tensin had oversaw this plot there had never been anything else. The peasant class was an idiotic,

pathetic lot. They would complain, but never for long. The Taskmasters and their whips sorted them out quickly enough.

Tensin turned to the boy standing beside him on the tower. "One would think that with as many generations they've been working here that they would be a bit more effective at it."

The shinobi turned, regarding him with a perfectly empty expression â€" devoid of any emotion that could remotely be classified as human. The boy couldn't have been older than fifteen. Short-cropped black hair framed a face as pale as the moon. He wore a sword, though Tensin had little doubt that the boy could kill him just as easily without it.

Tensin was of the branch house, and distantly at that. He'd be surprised to learn if anyone from Konoha knew he was out here. The Byakugan hadn't been seen in his direct line for nine generations. His father's eyes had slight tinges of brown to the traditionally white irises. Tensin had even more.

Tensin's father had been a failure, both as a man and a shinobi. That failure had cost Tensin the right to learn the Hyuuga's family style, even with as watered down as a member of the branch family was permitted to learn. He had no intention of following in his father's footsteps. He had made plans and alliances early in his life. Those alliances paid dividends when he'd been appointed this position.

"You have done well, Tensin," the shinobi said, turning back to watch the workers labor. "Root appreciates your efforts increasing production in this area of the region. How many do you lose a month?"

"Oh, I would say a half dozen or so," Tensin said. "Some to beatings, some to exhaustion."

Slavery may have been illegal in Konoha, but here within the dregs of Suna and Iwa, no one paid attention. No one cared.

"Runaways?"

"Never!" Tensin said. "None above ground, at any rate. Some go into the shafts and try to find escape that way. Their bodies are found some time later. When I was first given this place, I had a few runaways â€" but I executed their families. The rest quickly lost heart. I've never understood men who have trouble with their product. I find them easy to control with a firm enough hand."

The shinobi nodded, standing quietly in his dark uniform. If he was pleased, it was impossible to tell. The slaves weren't actually Tensin's, but belonged to the organization he had been recruited into when he was a child. There he was taught how to manage large groups of people and oversee an estate like the one he was currently overseeing.

"It will be done, Tensin," the shinobi said. "I will deliver your request to our leader. I will give him a favorable report from what I've seen here."

Tensin repressed a smile.

The Shinobi turned toward him. "I will be leaving after I inspect the cannon docks."

"So soon?" Tresting asked. "Supper will be in a few hours. The servants are preparing an Iwan feast in celebration of your visit."

The shinobi smiled " he probably meant for it to be disarming, but Tensin only found it unnerving. "I have other inspections to make on my way back to the capital."

Tensin nodded slowly, feeling a slight relief that the man-boy wouldn't be joining him for dinner.

"I am satisfied with what I've seen here," the shinobi continued. "You appear to clean up your messes and there are no rumors of your presence in the surrounding areas. A man such as yourself is valued in our organization. A few more years work and I'm sure your son will receive training in Konoha."

The shinobi turned away, and this time Tensin couldn't repress his grin. It wasn't a promise, or even a recommendation, but to hear praise from one of leader's own Shinobi Some men in the organization found them annoying, but at that moment Tensin could have kissed his honored guest.

Tensin turned back toward the slaves, who worked quietly in the rain. Tensin remembered tales his father told of his grandfather's dreams of perhaps moving into Konoha. He had heard of the balls and the parties, the glamour and the intrigue, and it excited him to no end.

_ I'll have to celebrate tonight, _ he thought. There was that young girl in the fourteenth barrack that he'd been watching for some time.
. . .

He smiled again. A few more years of work, the shinobi had said. But, could Tensin perhaps speed that up, if he worked a little harder? His slave population had been growing lately. Perhaps if he pushed them a bit more, he could bring in an extra shipment of ore this summer, fulfill his promises to Leader an extra measure.

Tensin nodded as he watched the crowd of lazy slaves. They didn't complain in broad daylight. They didn't hope. They barely dared think. That was the way it should be, for they were slaves. They were

Tensin froze as one of the slaves looked up. The man met Tensin's eyes, a spark of defiance showing in his expression. Tensin had never seen anything like it, not in the face of a slave. Tensin stepped backward reflexively, a chill running through him as the strange, straight-backed, elderly slave with long gray hair held his eyes.

And smiled.

Tensin looked away. "Taka!" he snapped.

The burly taskmaster rushed up the incline. "Yes, my lord?"

Tensin turned, pointing at. . . .

He frowned. Where had that slave been standing? Working with their heads bowed, bodies stained by soot and sweat, they were so hard to tell apart. Tensin paused, searching. He thought he knew the place . . . an empty spot, where nobody now stood.

But, no. That couldn't be it. The man couldn't have disappeared from the group so quickly. Where would he have gone? He must be in there, somewhere, working with his head now properly bowed. Still, his moment of apparent defiance was inexcusable.

"My lord?" Taka asked again.

The shinobi stood at the side, watching curiously. It would not be wise to let the boy know that one of the slaves had acted so brazenly.

"Work the slaves in that shaft a bit harder," Tensin ordered, pointing. "I see them being sluggish, even for slaves. Beat a few of them."

Taka shrugged, but nodded. It wasn't much of a reason for a beating—but, then, he didn't need much of a reason to give the workers a beating.

They were, after all, only slaves.

End
file.